

EXAMINING ACCURACY IN STUDENTS' SPOKEN
AND WRITTEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE VIA DIGITAL
STORYTELLING

BY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate how Digital Storytelling helped enhance learners' language accuracy, and the learners' perceptions on Task Condition and Task Difficulty in implementing Digital Storytelling. The impetus of this study is rooted in issues such as graduate employability, and poor English proficiency in Malaysia especially among school leavers. The researcher sought to understand the phenomena by exploring areas such as English as a second language and language learning motivation. There have been numerous researches in the areas of English as a second language, language proficiency, the language skills and learner motivation. However, not enough is known about the spoken and written accuracy of language production in the Malaysian context. The theory that guides this study is the Cognition Hypothesis that consist of the elements in task design such as Task Complexity, Task Condition and Task Difficulty. The task selected to explore language accuracy and task-based approach was Digital Storytelling. 55 students in an ESL course were selected as participants. Participants developed their Digital Storytelling over ten weeks. To obtain rich and thick data, data was triangulated via reflective journal entries and vlog. Then, the data was analysed via thematic and document analysis to investigate written and spoken accuracy and, explore how participants respond to the elements in Task Condition and Task Difficulty. The findings revealed insightful results. In terms of language accuracy, it was found that both written and spoken accuracy were not impactful. In the 14th week of the task, 13 errors were identified in written language, while 14 errors were found in spoken language. Errors such as subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, and first language interference were present in both language production. 7 themes within the Task Condition dimension elucidated participants' experiences while, 7 themes outlined their experiences within Task Difficulty. Additionally, the findings revealed the potential of Digital Storytelling as a powerful pedagogical tool in preparing learners with the 21st century skills, and engaging learners' in enhancing their soft skills, teamwork, engagement, creativity, and motivation.

خلاصة البحث

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو التحقق من الكيفية التي ساعد بها رواية القصص الرقمية على تعزيز دقة لغة المتعلمين، وتصورات المتعلمين حول حالة المهمة وصعوبة المهمة في رواية القصص الرقمية. والدافع وراء هذه الدراسة متجذر في قضايا مثل قابلية توظيف الخريجين وضعف إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية في ماليزيا خاصة بين المتسربين من المدارس. وتسعى الباحثة إلى فهم الظواهر من خلال استكشاف مجالات مثل اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية ودافع تعلم اللغة. وهناك العديد من الأبحاث في مجالات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية، وإتقان اللغة، ومهارات اللغوية ودافع المتعلم. ومع ذلك، لا يُعرف ما يكفي عن الدقة المنطوقة والمكتوبة لإنتاج اللغة في السياق الماليزي. والنظرية التي توجه هذه الدراسة هي فرضية الإدراك التي تتكون من العناصر في تصميم المهام مثل تعقيد المهام وحالة المهمة وصعوبة المهمة. وكانت المهمة المختارة لاستكشاف دقة اللغة والنهج القائم على المهمة هي رواية القصص الرقمية. وتم اختيار 55 طالبًا في دورة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية كمشاركين. وطور المشاركون رواية القصص الرقمية الخاصة بهم على مدى عشرة أسابيع. وللحصول على بيانات غنية وكثيفة، تم حساب البيانات عبر إدخلات دفتر اليومية العاكسة ومدونة الفيديو. وبعد ذلك، تم تحليل البيانات من خلال التحليل الموضوعي وتحليل الوثائق للتحقيق في الدقة المكتوبة والمنطوقة، واستكشاف كيفية استجابة المشاركين للعناصر في حالة المهمة وصعوبة المهمة. وكشفت النتائج نتائج ثابتة. ومن حيث دقة اللغة، وجد أن كلا من الدقة المكتوبة والمنطوقة لم تكن مؤثرة. وفي الأسبوع الرابع عشر من المهمة، تم تحديد 13 خطأ في اللغة المكتوبة، بينما تم العثور على 14 خطأ في اللغة المنطوقة. وهناك أخطاء مثل اتفاق الفعل الموضوعي وتركيب الجمل وتداخل اللغة الأولى في إنتاج اللغة. وأوضحت 7 موضوعات ضمن بُعد حالة المهمة تجارب المشاركين، بينما حددت 7 موضوعات تجاربهم ضمن صعوبة المهمة. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، كشفت النتائج عن إمكانات رواية القصص الرقمية كأداة تربوية قوية في إعداد المتعلمين بمهارات القرن الحادي والعشرين، وإشراك المتعلمين في تعزيز مهاراتهم الرقيقة، والعمل الجماعي، والمشاركة، والإبداع، والتحفيز.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SPM Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The impetus of this study is rooted in issues such as graduate unemployability, and English proficiency in Malaysia. The researcher sought to understand the phenomena by exploring areas such as English as a second language and language learning motivation. There have been numerous researches in the areas of English as a second language, language proficiency, the language skills and learner motivation. However, not enough is known about the spoken and written accuracy of language production in the Malaysian context. Furthermore, the researcher is interested in investigating how the elements in the Cognition Hypothesis relate with one another in implementing a task in the language classroom. The disciplines in the present research include language, psychology, digital literacy, multimodal literacy and task-based approach. Throughout this thesis, important areas will be elaborated to elucidate the audience on how these disciplines converged in the context of this study.

In the Malaysian public-school syllabus, English has been part of the syllabus (English as a Second Language) since 1957 with the realization of the Education Ordinance. Then, it was reaffirmed in the Education Act 1961 and 1996, and finally issued in the National Education Policy in 1970 (Azman, 2016). Formally, in Malaysia, students attended six years of primary school and five years of secondary school. Every week for 11 years, students were exposed to approximately 200 minutes of English at school (Darus, 2009).

All fifth-form, secondary school students who were attending public schools in Malaysia must sit for the national examination called the Malaysian Certificate of

Education or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). To qualify them for enrolment in a diploma programme in higher learning, they must earn a pass in English. Unfortunately, this meant that students only needed to acquire a minimum grade C in their secondary school exam which is the passing grade for English in SPM.

This led to the mismatch of the reality in the Malaysian educational setting with the expectations of educators and future employers. Despite 11 years of formal schooling, a majority of school leavers have noticeably poor mastery of English. ‘The Malaysian Employers Federation has voiced its concern...that students, even with distinction grades, are unable to converse and communicate in English’ (Vethamani, 2014, para 1).

‘There is no better predictor of a nation’s future than what is currently happening in its classrooms’ (Preliminary Report of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013– 2025, p. 1). In other words, what takes place in its classrooms can determine the success of a country. In line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the Ministry sees it fit for students to be better prepared to meet global challenges by embracing qualities of resilience, curiousness, innovativeness and communicative competence. Classrooms must prepare and provide for students by fitting its curriculum to be relevant with the changing times. Simultaneously, this shift focuses on curriculum revolving around technology as it is undeniable that today’s generation is among the digital natives. This change and growth in the education system also include efforts to improve the teaching and learning in the second language.

It can be hard to detect and provide help to weak students while they were at school. The system in Malaysian schools do not hold back students (grade retention). As the school year ended, they would continue to advance in their grades (also known as, standard) although they might be placed in weaker classes. Students were allowed

‘automatic progression or social promotion’ in their schools (Briggs, 2013). Grade retention is not the answer to identifying weak students, but unfortunately, to advance the students to the next grade can also be unfair due to their lack of readiness to tackle more advanced syllabi. For years the reality in Malaysia was that students, no matter how weak, would advance through the grades. Then, some would enrol into higher learning once they left school. To enter higher learning, they must fulfil certain requirements as entailed by their faculty of choice.

Most graduates who failed to acquire jobs after graduation are the outcomes and products of the present practice. There is little time and effort allocated in the syllabi to develop students’ language skills. A 40-minute lesson seldom allowed students to practice English at all. Rather, the lessons were often focused on the teachers delivering the rules and students listening passively. The reality was that the students’ speaking ability was most often be left to chance such as through extracurricular activities, or interaction with classmates, friends and family. Additionally, these activities mainly prepared them for speaking assessments, but not for interaction in the real world. As compared to the short amount of time spent on speaking activities, even less was allocated for listening; ‘listening skills is even scarcer and neglected’ (Vethamani, 2014, para. 6).

Examinations such as SPM mainly tested students’ reading and writing skills. Therefore, most of the teachers’ effort and attention went into developing students’ proficiency in these skills. Perhaps another reason was that little focus was given to the oral communication because the oral examination is merely a school-based assessment and it did not contribute to the SPM grade. Additionally, since 2002, there were no formal tests to measure students’ listening ability. Thus, these two skills: listening and speaking were not assessed formally. There is concern that marks for

speaking assessments in schools were also given arbitrarily, as subjective evaluation by teachers would affect ‘the reliability and the validity of scores across schools’ (Vethamani, 2014, para. 9). As an outcome, years of schooling trained students to take examinations rather than to become proficient users of the language.

The four language skills needed to be integrated to be cognitively demanding, and functionally complex with the purpose of imitating real-world task. In an exam-oriented syllabus, the grades that students obtained should reflect the true quality of the students’ proficiency. Unfortunately, despite obtaining a distinction, exam grades only measured students’ ability to read and write in English (Vethamani, 2014). The researcher believed that it is unfair and inappropriate to consider a student as a ‘proficient or even adequate’ English speaker, when in fact, ‘they were neither taught nor tested in a manner that would help them develop their speaking skills’ throughout their 11 years in schools (Vethamani, 2014, para.16). The researcher believed that another, more engaging method to teach and expose English to learners is needed so that other factors that inhibit learners in English can be minimised or eliminated.

1.2 ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN MALAYSIA

The history of English language teaching in Malaysia began since the colonization of British in the Malay states. As a country that was previously colonized by the British rule, English was the language of administration (Gaudart, 1987). Post-Independence saw the enforcement of the New Education Policy in 1970, which led to a uniformed curriculum in the vernacular schools. Hence, Bahasa Malaysia was recognised as Malaysia’s national language and it became the medium of instruction in schools. The policy was established with the intent to create a national identity and unity among the people. The government felt that only the elite benefited from English while, others in

the outskirts, who were not proficient in the language, were side-lined (Haji Omar, 1996). Thus, post-Independence was the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the English language as a second language in Malaysia. Even though it was felt that the New Education Policy would benefit the people of Malaysia, some people feared that the English standard among Malaysian students will decline and lead to poor results in the national English exam. Consequently, this will result in missed economic competitiveness and lack of development and growth (Mohamad, 1991).

Over the past decade, one of the notable efforts by the Malaysian government to improve the English language was the teaching of the Science and Math in English (Gooch, 2009). The fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, implemented the policy in 2003 as an attempt to improve graduates' English proficiency and employability rate (Gooch, 2009). However, merely six years after the implementation, the policy was scrapped. Some of the argument for the reason discontinuing the policy was that the Malay nationalists felt that by enforcing the teaching of English in Science and Math, the government was side-lining the position of Malay as the national language (Gooch, 2009). Contrary to the government's standing on the matter, many parents and employers chose for English to remain as the language of instruction for Science and Math (Gooch, 2009).

The Malaysian Employers Federation who had pushed urgently for English to remain as an instructional medium, felt that the switch was a huge setback in improving the level of English proficiency in the country (Gooch, 2009). While the Malaysian Employers Federation applauded the efforts of the government to employ more English teachers, it was felt that poor English fluency is an unresolved disadvantage in the country's workforce, which was made worse since the public sector's main language is English. Consequently, this meant that local graduates were

further disadvantaged and would not be able to fulfil the needs and demands of the public and private employers (Gooch, 2009).

The present scenario in Malaysia revealed that there were approximately 200,000 unemployed graduates and the main reason was due to poor English language proficiency, as reported by the Malaysian Employers Federation (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2018). Employers were reportedly surprised when they met job applicants, who applied with immaculate resumes and cover letters, in perfect English, but failed to communicate well on the phone or face to face. Job applicants found it even more challenging when they applied for employment in the private sector. It is a sad and disturbing scenario because annually, there are about 200,000 graduates who have spent years studying and earning their degrees and diplomas, but a quarter eventually ended up unemployed due to lack of communication skills (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2018). Some of the comments from potential employers were that while the students know that they were supposed to be proficient in English, they still failed to accomplish even the basic communication. Even though their resumes and cover letters were spotless, the stark contrast could be seen during the interview where sometimes, not only was English the problem, but their confidence was also lacking. Most applicants also resorted to memorizing their resumes, which came off sounding rehearsed and stiff to the employers. When asked an out-of-the-box-question, some responded by directly translating from their mother tongue (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2018).

The Minister of Education reported that a recent survey revealed that there was an improvement in graduates' level of English. However, this contradicted with one of the major employers, who stated that over the past five years, the English levels among applicants have deteriorated greatly (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2018).

In 2014, English was planned to be made a compulsory pass subject for the public examination (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) (Naidu, 20 November 2015). Unfortunately, the plan was postponed after initial survey revealed that 25% of the students who took the test would have failed. A total of 400,000 students sat for the test, thus 25% would amount to 100,000 failures (Naidu, 20 November 2015). In the Malaysian setting where most of the population are bilingual, some of the population still only managed to speak their mother tongue. Although English is a subject taught at school, many are not able to master it. This scenario is most apparent when one goes to the rural areas where awareness and emphasis on the language is minimal (Naidu, 20 November 2015).

In 2015, as part of the government's high-immersion programme, a dual-language programme was introduced (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2016). This initiative was another effort made by the government following the failure of the implementation of the teaching of Science and Math in English in 2009. In the initial stage of implementation, the dual-language programme would allow 300 schools to teach Mathematics, Information Technology, Science, among many others, in either English or Malay. The initiative, led by PEMANDU (2015), sought to solve the recent issue of unemployed graduates.

During a dialogue session on the Malaysia Education Blueprint, the former Minister of Education, Muhyiddin Yassin remarked that something was amiss if after spending at least 11 years in both primary and secondary schools learning English, students were still struggling to articulate the language.

I am baffled on why our children after completing pre-school, primary school, secondary school, and tertiary education still cannot converse in English...They start learning English at pre-schools, and then they move on to primary and secondary schools...they should have the basic knowledge and they continue learning the language in universities... that is another four to five years... there should not be a problem...When students move on to higher learning institutions, the focus should be on upscaling, polishing and improving the command of the language (Muhyiddin Yassin in *The Borneo Post*, 10 December 2014, para. 3).

Despite the efforts of the government such as the implementation of teaching of Math and Science in English, the dual-language programme, and the formal years of schooling, there persisted an inconsistency in the outcome or results. In other words, the output or the mass product of the education system did not seem to reflect the input. Students who were the result of Malaysia's education system were still underperforming in the English language (Bidin, Jusoff, Aziz, Salleh, & Tajudin, 2009; Zubairi & Sarudin, 2009; Wei, 2014; Muftah & Rafic-Galea, 2013; Md Yunus & Che Mat, 2014).

Undeniably, language acquisition depends greatly on a lot of factors and Skehan (1989) remarked that each learner acquires language differently, in which their success rate depends on their learning styles, attitude, motivation, intellectual capability (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; Walqui, 2000; Pour-Mohammadi, Abidin, & Ahmad, 2012). It is conclusive that learner motivation and attitude is fundamental in language acquisition and therefore, were among the major reasons for poor English proficiency among Malaysian students (Thang, Ting & Jaafar, 2011).

The results in a related study led by Muftah and Rafic-Galea (2013) on motivation in language learning among Malaysian pre-university students, revealed that students were less driven to learn English in school. However, their motivation