

Evaluating Pronunciation Segment Of Propower I Software

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Abstract : Pronunciation skill has increasingly become one of the most important skills in acquiring comprehensible input in a conversation. The ProPower I software offers a pronunciation programme to help users to improve their pronunciation. It is crucial to evaluate the segment before adopting any part of the programme into a language classroom. In fact, evaluate language softwares manage to help teachers to see the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. This study focused on the sufficiency of the content and how the elements of user-friendliness were used in the pronunciation segment. This study was also to find out what are the characteristics of the programme that motivate the users to continue using the pronunciation segment of ProPower 1 software. This study involved 15 third year and 15 final year students from TESL programme, UTM. Software evaluation matrix was used as an instrument for the data collection. It contained 2 sections which were evaluation matrix and structural form of questions. From the findings, majority of the respondents agreed that the content was sufficient for the low and intermediate level of users. Most of the respondents stated that the elements of user-friendliness used in the programme were ease in navigation of the programme, consistent use of the buttons and icons and acceptable use of symbols and icons. Audio, games and voice recording were proven to be the most influential factors among the respondents that motivate the users to continue using the pronunciation segment of ProPower I software.

Keywords : pronunciation segments, propower I Software

Introduction

English has become one of the most important languages, which has dominated a few domains in term of communication, business, politics and administration. In fact, it is important to have a good command of the language in order to be employed. This preliminary requirement applied in most of the job vacancies especially international companies.

Since English has been widely promoted, the language teachers play vital roles in providing an effective teaching environment. Teaching language is no longer effective by just using talk and chalk technique and need to be improved by integrating the computer technology in the teaching and learning process. Many researches have proven that adopting Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in language classroom motivates the language learners. In fact, with computer technology, the students are actively engaged in the activities conducted. In order to provide a better and challenging atmosphere requires the language teachers' ability and patience to work with the computer and softwares. In fact, it is crucial for the teacher to recognize the function and what the computer can do to help and enrich students with knowledge. For example, based on the topic provided by the teacher, the students are required to write an email to their friends that are their classmate. Therefore, the students will send an email and at the same time they will receive an email from their friends. There are many other activities can be conducted with the use of computer technology.

In addition, elements of multimedia make the process of teaching and learning more challenging and motivating for the teachers as well as the students. The elements of multimedia include the use of texts, graphics, audio, video and animation. With the right used of all the elements, allow the students to actively participated and receive comprehensible input. The students can easily grab a message from pictures or drawings compared to written texts.

Nowadays, self-access learning has becoming a learning trend among students at university level. The students are given the opportunity to work on their weaknesses at their own pace. This type of independent learning requires effort more from the students than the lecturers. With the dramatic growth in the development of language softwares, more opportunities are given for the language learners to acquire and to improve more than one language skills. Therefore the learners can work on the four language skills at a time. Language software can easily be found in many computer software shops. People are seeking for the right language software to fit with their needs.

Statement of Problem

It is crucial for teachers to evaluate any teaching materials before it is being adapted or manipulated for the teaching. Software, textbook reviews and needs analysis are some common processes involved before any materials are to be incorporated into the teaching.

Selecting language software requires a lot of effort in the sense that the teacher needs to have an overview or evaluation of few softwares that are able to help her in developing the teaching materials as well as to suit her students' needs. (Pi-Hua, Tsai, 2006). Therefore, the teachers can provide suggestions on the right language software for the students. Language teachers can cooperate to conduct overviews of language software so that they will be able to find the right software that match with variety of students' proficiency level.

What type of software suits which type of students? Commercial products are naturally inappropriate as vehicles for testing a specific theory of oral skill development (Rebecca Hinckes, 2003). The existing commercial software nowadays makes it hard for parents and teachers to choose the right software that is suitable for their children and intended learners in school. There are softwares which were developed without considering the theories or principles of language teaching. Besides that, the softwares are lacked of input, the elements of user-friendliness as well as motivational elements. Elements of user-friendliness and motivation are important to encourage users to use the software.

This study looked into the content sufficiency, elements of user-friendliness which include the ease of navigation, layout and the way of the content is presented in the pronunciation segment of ProPower 1 software. Besides that, this study also looked at the elements of multimedia which include the appropriate use of graphics, animations, text and audio available in the programme. In addition, this study paid attention to the use of speech recognition as well as other characteristics of the segment to create a motivating and encouraging learning environment.

Due to the situations mentioned earlier, the researcher believed that a study need to be conducted to evaluate pronunciation segment in the ProPower software based on variables indicated in the software evaluation matrix. The Pronunciation segment of the ProPower 1 software has been used by the Language Digital Laboratory, UTM for numbers of years to encourage the students to help the UTM students to improve their pronunciation.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To find out whether the content in the pronunciation segment of the ProPower I Software is sufficient for the users to improve their pronunciation
2. To look at the use of user-friendliness elements in the pronunciation segment
3. To look at the characteristics appear in the software that able to motivate continuous use of the pronunciation segment of the ProPower I software

Significance of the Study

The teaching of pronunciation skill should incorporate the use of multimedia elements in software to encourage interactive teaching and learning atmosphere. Students will be more motivated to learn when they find the learning is fun and allow the students to have a good control of their own learning as well as the materials.

One of the significance of this study is to promote the importance of knowing what to look at when evaluating language software before it can be used in any language classroom. In fact, it is the roles of the teachers to create the awareness among the students. Some of the students do not see needs to improve pronunciation since they have mastered other language skills.

This study can also be a form of reference for teachers as well as students. The evaluation matrix may help teachers to choose good language softwares. In fact it is the responsibility of the teachers to select good and effective software to be used in the classroom. The students have a wide range of knowledge background and abilities and the best person to select what is the best for that particular group of students is the teacher

Moreover, the results of this study are able to tell the content sufficiency as well as how the element of user-friendliness is used in the pronunciation segment. Content validity is one of the most important elements which can help users to see what they should learn and in what amount of input they should receive when using the programme. The elements of user-friendliness available in the programme help the users to go through the software easily. Besides that, it can also motivate the users to use the programme consistently.

In addition to that, this research functions as a guideline or a point of departure for the pronunciation software developers to design and produce a more practical and interactive software. By reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of this software, developers may be able to have a picture of what the language learning theories and methods that need to be put under consideration in order to develop good softwares. For example, certain software may apply drill and practice type of exercises and there is a number of software that utilizes the cognitive and constructivism theories in the exercises.

Finding

The presence of exercises is important in order to assess students' understanding of the lessons. Figure 1 shows the respondents' evaluation in terms of the sufficiency of the number of exercises available in order to improve learners' pronunciation.

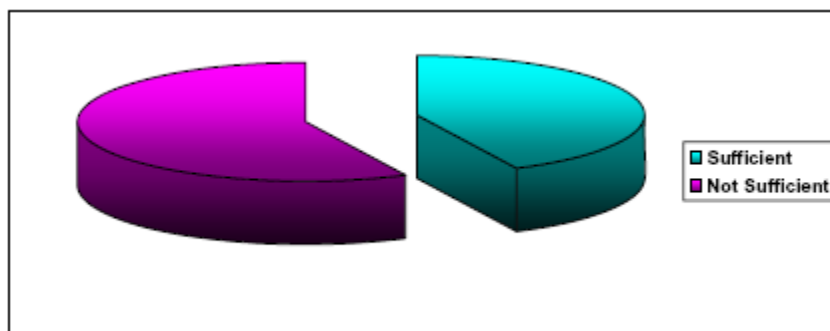


Figure 1 : Sufficiency of the Number of Exercises in the Pronunciation Segment.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the respondents' opinion in evaluating the sufficiency of the number of exercises provided in the pronunciation programme. Most of the respondents were not satisfied with the number of exercises. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents said that the exercises provided were insufficient to help the users to improve their pronunciation while another 33.3 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the number of exercises in the pronunciation segment.

According to the pie chart above, most of the respondents believed that the number of exercises available in the pronunciation segment should be based on the users' level of proficiency. Since the program have stated that the programme is designed for beginner and intermediate level users (ESL.net, 2007), therefore, some of the respondents agreed with the number of exercises in the pronunciation segment. This is to avoid any confusion or overflow of drilling practices among the users.

Discussion

This research investigated on the content sufficiency of the pronunciation segment of ProPower 1 software, the use of elements of user-friendliness in the programme. Besides that, this research was conducted to identify the characteristics available in the pronunciation segment that motivates users to continue using the software. The data was collected through software evaluation matrix and the respondents of the study were 15 students of the third year and final year of TESL, UTM programme. As mentioned earlier in the first chapter, the purpose of this study is to increase awareness of the needs to evaluate language software before it is adapting in language classroom. Besides that, this research serves as a guideline for teachers and lectures in software evaluation. In addition, it helps other users of ProPower I software to see the strengths and weaknesses of the pronunciation segment of the ProPower I software. This study looked into detailed the content sufficiency in terms of the input provided in the lessons as well as the sufficiency of the number of exercises available in the pronunciation segment. Besides that it also looked into depth how the elements of user-friendliness were used in the pronunciation segment. This research was also used to identify the characteristics in the pronunciation segment that motivate users to consistently use the software.

The findings reveal that the content is sufficient for the intended users of the pronunciation segment of ProPower I software. Meanwhile, the input provided in the lessons is also sufficient for both beginner and intermediate level users. However, the number of exercises provided is sufficient only to beginner level of users.

The results of this study show the strengths and weaknesses of the pronunciation segment of ProPower I software. By knowing the strengths and weaknesses of a programme, the teachers and parents can choose the best language software that suits the needs of their students as well as children. Other than that, they can know the elements that they need to look through before selecting language softwares. This study is also beneficial for language software developers to put into consideration of certain factors in order to develop good language softwares.

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