

The Feasibility Of ‘Tell Me More’ Oral Activities In Developing UTM Students’ Speaking Skill

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Abstract : English speaking skill is becoming more important among university students. Through the Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development (FPPSM) UTM, the Self-Access Learning is introduced into the English proficiency courses. Tell Me More is one of the software that provides the activities for the students to improve their English speaking skill. The use of this software inspired the researcher to find out its feasibility in developing UTM students’ speaking skill. A total of 70 students who were involved in the research were asked to fill up the questionnaire. As a whole, students agreed with the use of Tell Me More in helping them to enhance their English speaking skill. The feedbacks received provide useful information about i) students’ perception of the Tell Me More oral activities, and ii) the problems that students faced while using the software. Apart from that, the researcher has given a few recommendations that can be used for the future research which related to the topic of this study.

Keywords : tell me more, UTM students’ speaking skill

Introduction

Speaking plays a crucial role in the language learning process. It is a productive skill; that is, some ‘product’ is expected. Compared to the Listening and reading, which are both receptive skills; students are passively receiving and processing information. Speaking involves vocabulary, pronunciation as well as the structure and rules of grammar. Levelt (1989) has put together a framework that characterizes speaking as a multilevel process, moving from intention to articulation. It involves acoustic, linguistic, social, pragmatic, and functional characteristics. Due to that, it is clear that speaking is an essential combination of variety units that individual needs during their communication.

Previously, CALL was designed to enable students to listen, read and fill in the blanks, but not to produce oral language. Speaking was also absent from testing because of the difficulty in evaluating it objectively and the time it takes to conduct speaking tests (Clifford, 1987). Finally, speaking has been neglected in CALL technology.

The current situation is different. Presently, many programmers have introduced language learning software that is speech-enabled to foster learners’ involvement in interactive speaking activities. But the following questions remain, how feasible CALL can be used to develop speaking skills? Various researches have been conducted to gain the concurrence and reliable explanations for the questions above. No matter what it is, the environment of learning speaking using CALL as students’ self-access learning has inspired the researcher to carry out this study.

Statement of Problem

Even though various research have been done regarding the self-access learning programme for students speaking development, this phenomenon is still new in UTM There are a few softwares can be used by the students as their self-access learning for course UHB 1412. Tell Me More is one of the software that provides the oral activities. The oral activities enable

learners to listen, record and playback for accuracy and to practice pronunciation. Besides that, it also provides real situations that encourage students to practice using the language.

Many researchers try to reveal the effectiveness of using the CALL as students self access learning although the findings are not consistence to assess effectiveness. Jones (2001) recognized that students can only learn from computers with the instruction and supervision of teachers, which means CALL, will not be effective without this essential interaction of teachers and students. Therefore, there is a need to know the suitability of the oral activities in the Tell Me More software in developing UTM students' speaking skill. Thus, instead of the feasibility, this research plans to reveal students' perception about the oral activities in the Tell Me More software including their problems while using it. It is hoped that the findings of the study could help to improve the use of Tell Me More in developing UTM students' speaking skill.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the feasibility of the 'Tell Me More' oral activities in developing UTM students' speaking skill.
2. To find out students' perception of the 'Tell Me More' oral activities programme.
3. To investigate students' problems while using the 'Tell Me More' oral activities.

Significance of the Research

The study will be conducted to find out the possibility of using the Tell Me More oral activities (TMMOA). The results gained from the study will be valuable sources of information for the learning development. It could provide information to lecturers, especially language lecturers as well as instructional multimedia designers on students' perceptions of the Tell Me More oral activities.

The study is also to distinguish the speaking learning software as self-access learning compared in the classroom teaching that develops students' speaking skill.

Research Design

There are many forms of research approaches being proposed by educationist; quantitative and qualitative approach. These two approaches have their own benefits. The researcher has chosen questionnaire because it could collect both quantitative and qualitative data (Najib Ghafar, 1996). It enables easy analysis of data and does not require face-to-face interaction.

Sample

The researcher was used a random purposive sampling because not everyone (UTM students) can be the respondents. In this research, purposive remarks the students who took the English for Academic Communication (UHB 1412) course in semester II 2007/2008. The students came from different faculties and they were either local or international students.

Self-access learning was a part of UHB 1412 requirement assessment. The students were required to use at least 5 activities from the 'Tell Me More' software. Seventy of UHB 1412 students were selected to be the respondents of the research.

Research Instruments

As mentioned earlier, the data were collected via the administration of the questionnaire. The following section discusses it further.

Questionnaire

A set of questionnaire was designed for this study. The questionnaire is semistructure in nature where it involves both open-ended questions and close-ended questions. The structure of the questionnaire was designed based on the one in Masdinah (2002). However, since additional information are required, while some were not relevant to the needs of this study, it was re-designed (refer to the Appendix 1). This questionnaire contained four sections, section A, section B, section C and section D.

In section A, respondents are required to fill in their personal demographics such as gender, age, and their academic backgrounds. The academic background such as year of study, secondary school academic qualification and MUET' s result were used in the analysis of data in Chapter 4. Additional information such as types of language is useful to the researcher because it can show how much the respondents have been exposed to the English speaking skills in their daily life.

Section B and C were designed with close-ended questions. The purpose was to obtain respondents' opinions, ideas, or comments on the options provided in the questionnaire. There are two types of close-ended questions used by the researcher, i.e. Likert-scale and ranking questions. In section B, the researcher used Likert-scale questions. This section revealed students' opinions in speaking skill and 'Tell Me More' oral activities (TMM Oral Activities). The questionnaire was designed for the respondents to answer it in two different situations. First, it is to be completed before using the TMM Oral Activities. The topic is related on respondents' view of their English speaking skill. The second part needs to be completed during and/or after using the TMM Oral Activities software. This part related of respondents' views on TMM Oral Activities software. The significance of having these two different situations is to compare the students' views before and after using the TMM Oral Activities software in terms of their speaking skill development. As have been mentioned earlier, section C is a ranking questions that provide degree of preference or choice on which activities in TMM Oral Activities that most preferred and least preferred by the respondents.

Section D was open-ended question which asks for respondents' opinions. Respondents are allowed to give lengthy responses on ideas, suggestions or comments on TMM Oral Activities. In this section, the researcher has provided two questions related to the respondents' experience during using TMM Oral Activities. An obvious advantage from this section is that the variety of responses should be in depth and truly reflect the opinions of the respondents.

The questionnaire is ended by additional information that required the respondents to fill in their score in TMM Oral Activities assessments. The data will be used by the researcher to support the finding analysis towards respondents' development after using the TMM Oral Activities. However, this part has been excluded from the questionnaire after the researcher analyzed the pilot study data.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the questionnaire was prepared by the researcher in bilingual because the respondents could be international students. For the local students, Malay language is provided to avoid misinterpretation that might affect the reliability of data. Besides, the respondents will have a better understanding of the question because the questions structures are easy and frequently used in a research.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out to determine the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. Besides, it helped the researcher to see the weaknesses of the questionnaire before it is used in

the actual study. The findings from the pilot study will help the researcher to improve the set of questionnaire that would help to achieve the objective of the research.

Ten questionnaires have been distributed to the respondents in Digital Language Lab C on Friday, 1st February 2008. From the pilot study, the researcher found a few of amendments need be done.

Based from the pilot study, the researcher found that four items from the set of questionnaire need to be modified. Firstly, the additional information on the last page of the questionnaire should be deleted because majority of the respondents did not know how to fill in their TMM Oral Activities assessment. According to the digital lab technician; the lecturers of UHB 1412 subject are the only people who have the authorization to access students' scores.

Secondly, some of the questions in the questionnaire should be changed to avoid ambiguity and inquiry of two aspects in one question.

Next, some corrections were made in term of the grammar and sentence structure. The correction referred to the choice of words would meant the same in English and Malay languages.

Lastly, the researcher needs to change the list of activities in the section C. Based on the UHB 1412 subject requirement, all the respondents were required to do the activities in the 'Guided Mode'. However, during the pilot study, the researcher discovered that some of the speaking activities in the 'Guided Mode' are not listed in the section C questionnaire. Hence, the results of the pilot study do not meet all the research objectives because the researcher had missed some important data. The questionnaire has been redesigned

How important and useful is the 'Tell Me More' oral activities in developing UTM students' speaking skill?

This part investigates the importance and useful of the 'Tell Me More' oral activities in developing UTM students' speaking skill. First of all, the researcher would like to know students' views on English speaking skill. Then, the researcher will relate the findings with the use of TMM Oral Activities.

Based on the analysis of the data, majority of the UTM students (58.6%) were not using English as their daily language. This is a big number because it represents more than half of the respondents.

Table 1 : Students' views on English speaking skill

Item	Statement	SA	A	NS	D	SD
1.1	<i>English Speaking skill is important for university students</i>	75.4%	11.4%	1.4%	1.4%	10%
1.2	<i>I feel comfortable communicate using English.</i>	12.9%	31.4%	38.6%	14.3%	2.9%
1.3	<i>I have a problem speaking in English.</i>	17.1%	31.4%	24.3%	21.4%	4.3%
1.4	<i>I feel my English speaking skill is good.</i>	4.3%	15.7%	55.7%	15.7%	8.6%
1.5	<i>I need to improve my English speaking skill.</i>	61.4%	24.3%	2.9%	2.9%	8.6%

SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree NS = Not Sure D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree

In reference to the table 1 above, majority of the students (75% strongly agreed and 11.4% agreed) that they were aware of the importance of English speaking skill in the university.

In relation to this, 61.4% of the students were strongly agreed they need to improve their English speaking skill. It was also found that 55.7% of the students were not sure of their level of English Language proficiency. In addition, 38.6% of the students were also not sure whether they feel comfortable or not speaking in English. The researcher believed that the students could not figure out their main problem because speaking involves not only pronunciation but other components such as vocabulary and grammar. As Levelt (1989) mentioned, speaking is a multilevel processes, moving from intention to articulation. They could be good in English language but when it comes to speaking they were not sure on their abilities and skill.

Though majority of the students were having a problem in speaking, TMM Oral Activities is one of the alternative that useful and importance introduced by FPPSM to help the students develop their speaking skill. The students may use the software and maximize their practice in speaking based on their necessity and needed.

Students' problems while using the TMM Oral Activities

This part helped the researcher to identify the problems that students faced while using the TMM Oral Activities. The findings were important and useful due to improve the TMM Oral Activities.

Table 2 : Percentage of students' responses

Item	Statement	SA	A	NS	D	SD
2.3	<i>I do not have a problem using TMM Oral Activities.</i>	14.3%	40.0%	25.7%	17.1%	1.4%
2.7	<i>The instructions in TMM Oral Activities is very easy to understand.</i>	31.4%	45.7%	11.4%	8.6%	1.4%
2.8	<i>I enjoy using the TMM Oral Activities.</i>	28.6%	47.1%	15.7%	5.7%	2.9%

SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree NS = Not Sure D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree

The item 2.3 in the Table 2 above clearly states that most of the students were not having any problem using TMM Oral Activities. They enjoyed using the TMM Oral Activities. However, in the section D open-ended questions, some of the students have stated their problem. They discovered that TMM Oral Activities required them to pronounce in British accent. In Malaysia, the students are familiar with American slang because the influence of American English which is found mostly in the media or entertainment sector. The TMM Oral Activities would only accept if the students pronounce in British accent. Therefore, the students need to pronounce the same words many times.

Apart from that, some of the students discovered that they could not listen to the pronunciation very well. The computer pronounced the words quite fast in a British accent. Hence, the students could not identify the word well.

In addition, the researcher received a complaint from the students that they did not know how to log into the TMM Oral Activities. When asked, the lab technician said that the students should have attended the briefing session before using the TMM Oral Activities. The researcher realized that most of the students who have problems with the TMM Oral Activities were those who did not turn up during the briefing session. Therefore, they did not have a basic knowledge to use TMM Oral Activities. Hence, the students should consider this problem seriously because it is their responsibility to learn how to use the TMM Oral Activities before doing their self-access learning activities.

Discussion

The following conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of the study:

1. Students realized that speaking skill is important for university students. However, they need more help and encouragement in order to improve their speaking skill. Most of the students were not using English in their daily language. Perhaps, this is the main reason why the students felt uncomfortable speaking in English. Their daily communication is strongly influenced by their first language.
2. It was clearly stated that students agreed that TMMOA helped them to develop their speaking skill. They preferred learning speaking using the software compared to learning it in the classroom. Using TMMOA, students can request for the computer to repeat the pronunciation as many times as they want. It has been proven in this study; the most preferred activities by the students were picture/word association with speech recognition and word pronunciation. This finding showed that students were introverted learning pronunciation in the classroom. However, by using TMMOA the students were more focused as it happened simultaneously between the students and the computer.
3. Hill (1994) express the important of focusing on the learner rather than a technology and making computers more adaptive to learners' needs when developing strategies for computer programs. The study showed that TMMOA can be considered as a software that meets students' needs in developing their speaking skill. Majority of the students agreed that TMMOA helped them in term of pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary. Apart from that, the students also discovered that TMMOA is a software that is user-friendly and they managed to use it without help from others.
4. Most of the students responded that they did not have a problem using the TMMOA. As mentioned earlier, they found that the software is user-friendly. However, the problems faced by some students while using the TMMOA were related to the technical problem and non-technical aspect of the software.

Although majority of the students agreed with the use of TMMOA in developing their speaking skill, the researcher felt dissatisfied on the percentage of 'Not Sure'(NS) responses. In reference to the findings in Chapter Four, the frequency of NS responses is considered high for every item. This could probably the students were not confidence when using TMMOA. Hence, if the students are given more time to explore the software, the researcher believes that the percentage of the NS students will decreased.

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