ENHANCING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AMONG UniMAP FOREIGN STUDENTS THROUGH THE USE OF COMPUTER-AIDED INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies and publications have shown that using Computer Aided Instruction in the form of educational software and courseware especially in the teaching and learning of English Language is able to maximise the performance and proficiency of second and foreign language learners – “Computers indisputably can make a worthwhile contribution to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language”; (Wyatt, 1984:4). In the case of Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), recently about 31 foreign students from China registered for the Intensive English Course offered by the UniMap English Unit. These students have no exposure to the English Language and can converse only in Mandarin. So, the teaching instructors were having a hard time teaching these students and vice-versa. In the attempt, to make teaching and learning less stressful and less time-consuming, these students were introduced to Computer-Aided Instruction in the form of English teaching and learning courseware to help them build their proficiency level and also to ease the teaching difficulties the instructors were undergoing. The coursewares used are ELLIS and DYNED. This study investigates the effectiveness of using the purchased coursewares to teach English to the China students. Do the coursewares help these foreign learners to learn English more effectively? This paper attempts to report and present the Effectiveness of the English Coursewares – DYNED and ELLIS in enhancing the English Language proficiency level of the China students. The methods used were survey – questionnaires, test results and interview. It was found that the frequency of English courseware usage among the foreign students were considerably high during the duration of the piloted study. Results of the English tests that these students sat on a monthly basis also improved tremendously. In other words, the courseware does help these foreign English language learners improve their proficiency level.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2008, the English Language Unit at University Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) was instructed to develop an Intensive English Programme for the foreign students from China, Thailand and Indonesia. The main purpose of this Intensive English classes was to help these foreign students improve their English Language proficiency and communicative competence since almost all of them had no basics in the English Language. Since, these foreign students had very little or no exposure to the English Language; teaching them proved to be difficult for the English instructors as there were no common language which were understood by both parties. Therefore as an attempt to help ease the learning and teaching process for both parties, computer-aided instruction in the form of English language coursewares namely DYNED and ELLIS were integrated into the lessons. With the integration of the computer aided-instruction in the Intensive English classes, the UniMAP English Language Unit hopes to overcome the nagging problems faced by both the English Language instructors and the foreign learners.
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Numerous reports and publications have shown that using the educational software and courseware in English Language teaching and learning is able to increase the performance and proficiency levels of second and foreign language learners. As such, the UniMAP English Instructors resorted to using Computer Aided Instruction to tackle the teaching and learning problems faced by the foreign students from China. This study will seek to investigate the effectiveness of using the purchased coursewares to teach English to the foreign students from China. Do the coursewares – DYNED and ELLIS help these foreign English Language learners to learn English more effectively? Are these coursewares able to increase their performance and proficiency levels?

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The objectives of the study are, specifically to investigate how effective computer-aided instruction is in the teaching of English to foreign English Language students. It is also to investigate these foreign students’ perspectives towards the usage of the English language coursewares – DYNED and ELLIS in the teaching of English.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Do the coursewares used in the Intensive English Language Classes increase the Foreign English Language learners’ receptivity towards the English lessons?
2. Do the Foreign English Language learners like using the DYNED and ELLIS coursewares to learn English?
3. What is the frequency of the courseware usage in the Intensive English Language Classes?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study would alert not only the UniMAP English language instructors but also the University administrators about the benefits of using computer aided instruction to teach English not only to the foreign English language learners but also to UniMAP’s Engineering students as well. Furthermore, the findings would also signify that spending a huge budget to purchase, install and train the language instructors to suit the course is worthwhile. It is also hoped that this study will open doors and windows to other researchers to investigate related areas in the use computer aided instruction to teach the English Language.
LITERATURE REVIEW

“Under the Seventh Malaysian Plan, the Ministry of Education has been given the mandate of equipping the people to become a technological society.” (News Straits Times, 29 May 1997). The Malaysian government policy above signifies that computers have already secured its place in the Malaysian society especially in education and industry. In 1996, the Ministry of Education initiated the Smart Schools Programme. “Technology is to be the driving force behind the implementation of Smart Schools in Malaysia.” (News Straits Times, 3 March 1999) The paper by the Ministry of Education (December 1996) entitled ‘Smart Schools in Malaysia: a Quantum Leap’, describes the Smart Schools project as an effort to make Malaysian schools more “high-tech”. This shows that in the past until present, our government had given emphasis towards integrating computer in education and thus this as also provided broad prospects in the field of language teaching as well.

Computers and Language Teaching

“Computers indisputably can make a worthwhile contribution to the teaching of English as a second language”, (Wyatt, 1984:4). The fundamental ideas behind CAI (Computer Aided Instruction) or CAL (Computer Assisted Learning) is the notion that the computer as a tool or medium can be used by students and instructors alike, to improve learning and teaching. Ann Jones and Neil Mercer (1993:3-25) argue that any teaching is based upon a model of learning, either consciously or otherwise. Similarly since educational software is a resource designed to support teaching and learning, it will likewise incorporate such models.

Experts long recognized for their work with computers in education (see Higgins, 1988; Leech & Candlin (eds) 1986; Underwood, 1994; and Windeatt, 1986) stress that Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is an excellent alternative to the dull traditional mode of instruction and has the potential to assist students to learn language efficiently and effectively. CALL enables the instructor to create the kind of environment which generates simulation and creates other communicative activities which requires and allows one-to-one teaching interaction so that the instructors can pay attention to the needs of each student by individualizing the learning experience. Other researches conducted by various experts in this field have also echoed similar potentials of CALL even when applied in various language classroom settings.

Student Motivation and CALL/CAI

Chitravelu et al. (1995:10) and Khurshid et al. (1985:121) insist that motivation is an unquestionably important factor in language learning and acquisition. Their claims are echoed by both educational psychologists and books on Educational Psychology which repeatedly emphasis that motivation is critical towards students performances, high grades, competition and achievement. The motivating aspects of learning with CALL are widely touted since most general findings from both qualitative and quantitative CALL researches point to the fact that students have positive attitudes towards computers and computer-assisted learning. Many of these research findings refer to ‘interest’, ‘enjoyment’, ‘motivation’ or ‘task concentration’ (Warschauer, 1996). Warschauer further adds that if for example, there is among learners an almost natural attraction to the computer, then they have had pleasant, pleasurable experiences with the computer, and would come to the CALL classroom with the right attitude and motivation. If the instructor is judicious in her choice of
software and his/her classroom strategies are effective, then both the software and the instructor would create conditions that would enhance motivation to learn. There are other attractions as well, e.g., the individualized nature of CAI (Higgins & Johns, 1984), the opportunities for learner control (Kenning & Kenning, 1990) and the rapid, frequent and non-judgemental feedback that is built into much of CALL software (Jones & Fortescue). These are issues which merit investigations.

About the Language Courseware utilized at UniMAP

DYNED Courseware

This courseware is designed to help learners acquire the target language in a natural but accelerated mode of learning. It represents a significant advance over traditional English Language learning skills. As with any new set of tools, however, instructors and students alike need to develop techniques and strategies for using it most effectively. A study guide is given to the instructors to refer on how to utilize this courseware most effectively.

ELLIS Academic

ELLIS combines the technology of Computer Aided Instruction with established instructional theories. It effectively utilizes the computer for language learning, giving learners realistic situations and the opportunity to play an active role in the learning process. The curriculum is taught using scripts and contextual videos where learners are taught everyday English Skills using natural English in real-life situations. As the curriculum covers practical topics such as meeting people, banking and shopping, learners are consistently encouraged to immediately use what they have learnt.

ELLIS consists of four levels of instruction that are based on proficiency levels. The levels are Basics, Intro, Middle Mastery and Senior Mastery. Each level of instruction is organized into units with each unit divided into lessons, a game, a test and a test review. Teachers can use this division as a learning sequence. Learners could begin by completing each lesson of which there are usually a total of three to six lessons within a unit. Then they progress to playing the language games, taking the unit test and reviewing their test performance.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 31 foreign students from China who were taking the Intensive English language classes were selected to participate in this study.

Instrument

A specially designed questionnaire comprising three parts was used to collect data needed for the study. All together, there are 20 items in the questionnaires which range from Yes-No questions, likert scale and open-ended questions. Part A: Views towards the English Language and whether they have used the courseware; Part B: Attitude towards using the courseware, and Part C: Frequency of courseware usage in the English class.
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