

Keeping Up with Digital Trends: Reflecting Students' Experiences using MP3 Experiment in Non-formal Listening Activity

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Abstract: *The research focuses on non-formal learning activity that involved the application of mobile technologies to facilitate active participation among low proficiency English as Second Language (ESL) students in Malaysian higher education. The results discussed on the reflection of students' experiences that resulted from the application of MP3 experiment. The respondents consist of 512 Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Band 1 and 2 students. This MP3 experiment is conducted within an experiential approach and questionnaires and self-reports were used as instruments for data collection to explore students' experiences undergoing non-formal learning process in more detail. As the results shown in this study, challenging activities as well as new interactive methods and strategies can enhance students' interests in language learning process and mobile technologies can be a tool that links non-formal to formal learning.*

Keywords: *Non-formal learning; mobile technologies; ESL university students; MP3 experiment*

I. INTRODUCTION

In response to 4th industrial revolution, Ministry of Higher Education introduces the Ecosystem for English Language Learning and Assessment in Higher Education. This ecosystem provides a holistic and integrated learning atmosphere where students can participate in the meaningful and experiential learning activities using English which will also promote personal development. Focusing on communication, team work, human relations and solving problems, the ecosystem promotes learning English as we use it and using English as we learn. The ecosystem also connects the formal and non-formal learning of English. Students can apply what they have learnt in the classroom in real-life situations (Ministry of Higher Education, 2017).

The ecosystem believes that students perform different types of communicative activity which requires physical and virtual space and connections using available resources, tools and technologies. It needs connections to link students-teachers, teachers-experts, university-industry locally and abroad, inside and outside classrooms.

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The connections should cross the boundary of disciplines and geography which will promote interdisciplinary collaboration and global engagement (MOHE, 2017).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-formal Education

Non-formal education is organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve an identifiable learning groups with identifiable learning objectives (Luxemburg Ministry of Family and Integration, 2013).

Listening in Digital Technology

Listening for language learning using technology has evolved in line with technology evolution. Evolution of technology has transformed audio and video materials in portable form which can be played using handheld devices such as MP3 player and smart phones (Hubbard, 2012). Listening using digital technology will be at enormous assistance in language learning. Zhao (2003) stated that modern technology can support language education by improving the quality of input and authenticity of communication as well as offering more significant and valuable responses.

Digital technology satisfies the millennials' lifestyle. They function with the technology. They can complete a task, listen to the portable CD player, and talk on the cell phone simultaneously (Dziuban, Moskal & Hartman, 2005). The millennial students are totally dependent on Internet connection from the computers and mobile phones for studying, listening to music, as well as communicating with each other via call or text messages (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray and Krause, 2008). The millennials are ready to use particularly their hand-phones for learning purpose. They are willing to learn and use their mobile phones for education purpose should they be given internet-able mobile phones (Rahmat, Shah, Din & Aziz, 2017).

Combining bottom-up and top-down in a listening lesson

Language activities should develop students' level of listening ability which will be useful in the real world, not only in a lecture room. In real world listening, both bottom-up and top-down processing generally occur simultaneously.



It depends on the listener's familiarity with the content of the topic, the density of information in the text, the text type and the listener's purpose in listening (Richards, 2015). Applying technology in a non-formal language activity can provide students effective learning practice and fun learning environment. During this activity, explicit instructions were given, activating past lessons on 'Imperatives'. Learners were asked to listen to specific information or tasks and execute them immediately.

MP3 experiment

The Mp3 Experiment is a participatory audio adventure where attendees download an audio file and listen to synchronized secret instructions in a public space via headphones (*Improv everywhere*, 2011). Using MP3 format audio will assist in language learning as the evolution of technology has transformed MP3 player into a learning device. Godwin – Jones (2005) has proposed that MP3 allows language learners to improve on pronunciation, review instructors' comments on assessments and assignments, acquire new vocabulary and pronunciation. MP3 can improve listening skills as well as promote non-formal learning.

Hubbard (2012) suggested that technology revolution such as MP3 improves listening skills as well as encouraging non-formal learning. Language learners are able to control and modify recorded speech and speech rate which are extremely relevant to listening comprehension and language acquisition. They are exposed to future authentic online listening materials beyond the classroom via YouTube, streamed lectures and other online videos. These show that MP3 has promoted non-formal language learning. Mobile technologies have been found out to be engaging with the millennial learners (Martin & Ertzberger, 2013).

English on Demand (EOD)

English Language Learning Centre, Center of Fundamental and Liberal Education, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu introduces English on Demand as a non-formal learning programme whereby students with MUET Band 1 and 2 participate in English language based activities outside formal classroom. This programme was conducted to encourage students to use English and to build students' confidence in using the language outside classroom environment.

EOD's I I Listen, I Follow was one of EoD series conducted. It was an MP3 experiment. It was a session where participants downloaded an audio file and listened to secret instructions in a public space using headphones. This had synchronized what all of them were instructed to do at the same time. It was an engaging session that had promoted language and listening skills development in a fun and enjoyable outdoor setting.

The purpose for our research were:

- 1) to discover students' preferences in a non-formal English language activity
- 2) to discover the strength of applying digital technology in non-formal language setting
- 3) to propose principles for learning and teaching listening skills in the field of non-formal education

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed methods approach, which primarily use online survey and self-reports from the participants to discover their experiences during this learning activity. As to Creswell (1999), the use of mixed methods approach provides more solid evidence for studying a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative methods alone. This online survey consisted of 17 questions and it was used as it is less time-consuming and also it provides an abundant of information for researchers (Wright, 2005). The decision of collecting the data online was made to ensure the questionnaire as accessible as possible and also to reduce the effort to collect all responses from the large number of respondents involved in this study.

Sampling

The sampling technique employed was a purposive sample and the selection of respondents was based on the following criteria: all of them were first year full-time undergraduate students enrolled in a compulsory 3 credit "English for Academic Communication" course for students with Band 1 and 2 in MUET.

Instrument

The questionnaire contained 14 Likert scale statements (1 to 5) concerning students' preferences in a non-formal English language activity with "5" indicating strong agreement and "1" indicating strong disagreement. This section included questions on how the respondents had liked this activity, how they perceived the strengths of this activity as part of their English learning activity and whether they were satisfied with the English learning experiences they had acquired from this activity.

IV. RESULTS

Table 1 shown the respondents' demographic details. This study presents the findings from a total of 511 undergraduates with a majority of them were female (N=382, 74.8%) and the remaining were male (N=129, 25.2%) and majored in different programs. A majority of the respondents are in Band 2 with a total of 488 students (95.5%) and 23 students are in Band 1 (4.5%).

Table. 1 Respondents' demographic details

| Demographic Characteristics | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender Male | 382 | 74.8 |
| Female | 129 | 25.2 |
| MUET Result | | |
| Band 1 | 23 | 4.5 |
| Band 2 | 488 | 95.5 |

Table 2 describes the respondents' preferences in a non-formal English language activity and the strength of applying digital technology in non-formal learning activity.



Results implicate that all the respondents rated the items positively since the mean scores for all corresponding item ranged from 4.12 to 4.63 and were within the upper third of the normative distribution (3-4). The items were ranked based on the highest until the lowest mean score. The item

with the highest mean score is the item ‘I enjoy doing games and tasks in English in this activity’ (M=4.63) and the item with the lowest mean score is the item ‘I feel more confident using English after this activity’ (M=4.12).

Table. 2 Experiences in MP3 experiment.

| Item | Mean | Sd. |
|---|------|------|
| I enjoy doing games and tasks in English in this activity. | 4.63 | .514 |
| I enjoy learning English outside my formal classroom. | 4.62 | .525 |
| I think this activity is suitable for students to help them to improve their English. | 4.62 | .536 |
| I have learnt something new from this activity. | 4.52 | .534 |
| I would recommend EOD activity to my friends. | 4.45 | .574 |
| I feel motivated to learn English more after this activity. | 4.43 | .559 |
| My instructors motivate me to participate in the activity. | 4.42 | .567 |
| I was satisfied with the quality of my learning experiences in this activity. | 4.41 | .552 |
| My instructors have explained this activity well. | 4.41 | .603 |
| I have become more interested in English after this activity | 4.39 | .563 |
| I enjoy communicating with friends in English during this activity | 4.34 | .595 |
| I feel comfortable to communicate in English during this activity. | 4.33 | .576 |
| I was able to communicate freely in English during this activity. | 4.23 | .600 |
| I feel more confident using English after this activity. | 4.12 | .649 |

The respondents also were asked to rate their overall experience during this non-formal activity and 294 respondents (57.5%) rated their overall experience as excellent, 194 respondents (38.0%) rated their overall experience as good and 23 respondents (4.5%) rated their overall experience as fair as shown in Table 3.

Table. 3 Students’ overall experience during MP3 experiment

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Excellent | 294 | 57.5 |
| Good | 194 | 38.0 |
| Fair | 23 | 4.5 |

Students’ self-reports

For individual self-reports, the respondents were asked to give their opinion about the strengths of this activity and they were also asked to give their opinions on how to improve this kind of learning activity in the future. The idea was to allow the respondents to put forward their own hypotheses, recognise their strength and admit their own failures when necessary.

Most of the respondents were in agreement that this activity has a lot of strengths especially to ESL learners. They claimed that after this activity they are more confident in using English, be more motivated in learning English, and it can improve their communication skills and their vocabulary. The students explained their experiences as follows:

“In my opinion, the strengths of this activity is it made me feel more **interested** in English”

“In my opinion, I think this activity gave me many experiences and made me **more confident** to talk in English with others...”

“In my opinion, the strengths of this activity is, every participants can **communicate freely with strangers** during the listening activity”

“This activity is very fun and it **motivates me to improve** my English”.

“This program can help student be **a good listener** and improve their understanding and also we can learn new words from this activity.”

“This programmes make me enjoy and confident to join other activities conduct Ned in **English in the future.**”

The students also submitted their suggestions to be included in the next non-formal activity. Most of the students hoped that this activity will be continued in the future with more fun and challenging activities as they hope these activities will help to improve their English. The students, state as follows in their self-report:

“Include **more interesting activities** like language games”

“Include **more challenging activities** that involve speaking and maybe some writing activities”

“**Extend the duration** of this activity with more participants”

From the output of 511 respondents’ self-reports, as well as retrieving information from 17 instructors conducting “I Listen, I Follow” activity, several themes emerged on learners’ conceptions for learning in the field of non-formal education.



Table. 4 Themes emerged on learners' conceptions for learning of non-formal education

| Codes of Non-Formal Listening Activities | Reoccurrence by respondents (%) |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Non-specialised language usage: straightforward yet clear and specific messages | 23 |
| Listening materials should be attractive, interactive and dynamic | 83 |
| Rouse learners' interest without being frightening, yet force them out of comfort zone | 27 |
| Easy to use by all, collective usage for big groups | 57 |
| Materials can be transferable: modification and adaptation by others | 18 |
| Facilitate transformation of passive to active learners | 78 |

V. DISCUSSION

This paper clearly proves that creativity and technology are paramount in tackling low achievers' interests and motivation in learning English language in higher education which is consistent with the findings of Richards (2013) whereby he asserts that given time and responsibility for creative activity, students will collaborate with others and not be scared to take risks by accepting differences and diversity. Certainly, the findings signify that there is a strong need for more non-formal language activities since it motivates the students to communicate in English freely and comfortably as well as triggering their interests in exploring English language, even after the activities have long been completed.

Analysis of data exhibited has clearly depicted a very high interest in non-formal English learning. It is apparent that this type of activities appeals to them considering the fact that current technology was applied and it relates closely to their everyday life. Closer examination on the self-report revealed that the Band 1 and 2 students wanted to be challenged during learning by introducing more sophisticated vocabulary in a practical manner as well as extending the duration of the MP3 experiment activity. Hence, English language instructors need to take account learners' comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) in which they need to select input which is one level beyond of the learners' current level of competence not just during formal learning, but also in non-formal learning contexts. This would affirm that extending formal classroom language lessons to non-formal activities may intensify the significance of language learning to low achievers in higher education.

It is poignant to note that these Band 1 and 2 undergraduates' current competency in English is far from reaching the basic of graduate employability level due to their major deficits in linguistic knowledge, communication competence and self-confidence. Nevertheless, boosting their motivation by using persistent non-formal and fun English learning activities may help to increase their interest to use English in a non-threatening environment.

This approach of teaching listening can develop a level of listening ability which will be useful in the real world, not only in the classroom because learners were taught how to listen. Evidently, one activity could not drastically and immediately improve the current condition of listening in higher education. However, it is important to take a small yet steady step towards improving learners' listening activity by enriching them with authentic listening activity. Through the learners and instructors reflections, this paper

proposes five principles for teaching listening in the field of non-formal education namely;

1. to employ precise language without using specialised language
2. to devise/choose attractive, interactive and dynamic listening materials
3. to choose challenging materials without forcing learners to be frightened, yet force them outside of their comfort zone
4. to be transferable; allowing additions, modifications and adaptations by others, even big group of students
5. to be an agent of transformation for subsequent language classes by motivating them to learn the language easily and in a fun way

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper gives the indication that university's English language instructors must understand the needs of the millennial students and provide non-formal activities that suit them best. It is vital to provide additional and multiple English language opportunities and exposure in the university's environment. Graduating students need to be given more time in preparing to improve their language and soft skills for their future. Failure to address this will lead to producing graduates with low quality thus increasing the nation's burden of handling issues of unemployment. The universities must take cognisance of the need to constantly upgrade, improve and equip future graduates to be competent to meet the demands of local employers.

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