



USING LANGUAGE LEARNING SOFTWARE TO LEARN VOCABULARY: TELL ME MORE THROUGH THE LENSES OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zuraina Ali
Centre for Modern Languages
Universiti Malaysia Pahang
Malaysia

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Corresponding Author: zuraina@ump.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This study examines the uses of Tell Me More (TMM) software among engineering students in Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP). The study aims at finding students' abilities in retaining words learnt through Pre-test and Delayed Recall Post-test. The study also aims at identifying their preferences and challenges in using TMM. The study employed 43 students that were required to take vocabulary tests and participated in interviews to gauge their perceptions of using TMM. Results showed that there was a significant increase in the tests administered. The qualitative findings showed that students preferred the drag-and-drop feature in the software; among others. Yet, there were challenges in imitating the native-speaker in pronouncing target words, accessing TMM outside class hours and linking target words with its meaning. These findings provide empirical data for the use of computers in learning vocabulary.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Tell Me More, software, features, challenges, engineering students

INTRODUCTION

The use of computer in learning language is common to practitioners nowadays since class activities and assessments can be carried out via the platform. However, in integrating technology into the classroom, more importantly is the use of the software itself as its use determines whether it may benefit learners or otherwise. Practitioners on the other hand, need to be wise in choosing the appropriate software as one particular software may be suitable to be used for a skill but not in other skills. In another context, it seems customary in this digital technology era that textbooks come together with software since the latter resource enables its consumers to listen to media content. Fung (2017) argues that this 1 + 1 offer is often neglected by both; teachers and learners although these resources provide additional opportunities for language practice especially for the former. Nevertheless, Fung (2017) in her review on the Macmillan Education software program (MME) states that the software allows its users to develop their language abilities. The MME supports the access to digital resources regardless if the users use computer or mobile devices in their attempt to learn a language. Regarding the use of software, the current study examines the use of Tell Me More (TMM) that is used by the undergraduates in Malaysia to enrich and enhance their language skills in English as a Second Language. In the discussion that follows, the descriptions of the software are elaborated to identify its characteristics and its use among language learners.

Tell Me More software for language learning

TMM is an application software comprising of Cultural, Written, Vocabulary, Grammar, Oral and Lesson Workshops for learning English. However, only the Cultural Workshop is used for the study to depict its purpose of learning vocabulary. Three (3) modes of learning that are Dynamic Mode, Guided Mode and Free-to-Roam Mode are offered by the software. Dynamic Mode enables learners to adjust their learning path. The software constantly analyses the results obtained in each activity and then suggests which activity to do next; following the learners' needs and objectives. Secondly, the Guided Mode offers learners the Progress Chart and Diary that enable learners to organize their study by selecting activities and proposing a study plan, corresponding to their levels, schedules and objectives. Finally, the Free-to-Roam Mode enables learners to personalize their own learning. In the current study, students were required to use the Free-to-Roam Mode as the objective of using the software is to ensure they learn according to their inclination and work intensively on the vocabulary aspect.

In relation to the past studies that employed TMM as their research materials, for pedagogical content of TMM, its speech recognition is the most significant feature that is integrated in the software (Cristophe 2001). The ability to receive evaluative feedback for pronunciation aids, and hence, able to meet students' needs at progressing levels and in different speaking situations is another significant feature of the software (Hincks 2003). In the local context, TMM was used by 70 undergraduates in helping Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) to enhance their English speaking skill (Masdinah Alauyah Md. Yusof & Isni Mimiyanah Mohamad Borhan 2010). The students' views was shared by teachers as the latter claimed that it could improve students' proficiency especially in pronunciation and reading. In summary, past studies conducted using TMM focused on reviewing its online usage and speech recognition for pronunciation. To date, though, there is no empirical data collected in the use of TMM in relation to the learning of vocabulary. The present study, therefore, is carried out to add to the body of literature by contributing to investigate the use of TMM; in particular Vocabulary Workshop, in learning vocabulary.

Research Questions

The current study attempts to answer three (3) research questions prior to the use of TMM for vocabulary learning. These research questions are:

1. Is there any significant difference in the number of words learnt between the pre-test and delayed recall post-test when students use TMM to learn vocabulary?
2. What do the students prefer when they are instructed to use TMM for the learning of vocabulary?
3. What are the challenges that are faced by the students in the use of TMM in their quest to learn vocabulary?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The current study uses a mixed-method research design namely explanatory sequential research design to collect its data (Creswell 2017). Figure 1 shows the research design that is employed in the study in that it starts off with collection and analysis of quantitative data. This is to obtain answer for the first research question. Then, it is followed by the second phase where the qualitative data collection takes place. At this stage, not only that qualitative data is collected, it is also analysed so as to answer the remaining research questions – of which requires data to be transcribed, coded and themed. In other words, after collecting and analysing data of the pre-test and post-test and the scores demonstrates that there is significant increase in the number of words learnt between the tests, the researcher then conducts qualitative interviews with students to identify their preferences and challenges using TMM.

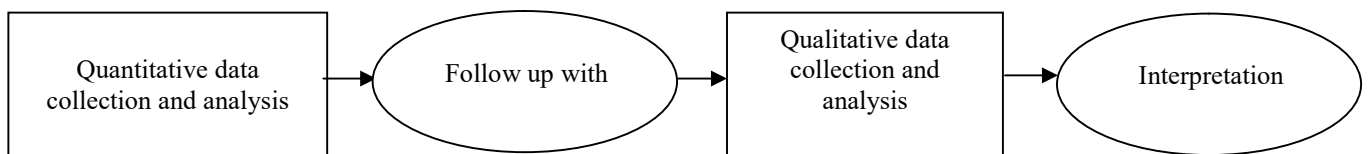


Figure 1: Explanatory Sequential Research Design

Sampling

The current study employed 43 engineering students as its samples. They were the first semester and first year students studying in UMP. Consent forms ensuring the confidentiality of the research data were distributed to them prior to the study. In the study, students took the pre-test in the first week. In the second and third week, they learnt 21 words in each of the week using TMM. A two-week gap of no vocabulary lessons and tests was scheduled in week four (4) and five (5). In week six (6), they took the Delayed Recall post-test. Later, in week seven (7), four (4) students were called for interview to obtain an in- depth analysis of the preferences and difficulties using TMM.

Data analysis

In analyzing the data for the current study, t-test as well as content analysis was employed. For the latter, particularly in identifying the preferences and difficulty using TMM, verbatim transcription was performed in analyzing all the interview protocols. Meanwhile, pseudonyms were used in reporting the interviews for the purpose of protecting the students' identities. Two (2) excellent students known as Jenny and Andrew and another two (2) poor students known as Ain and Misa were employed to identify their preferences and difficulties of using TMM.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The difference in the number of words learnt between the pre-test and delayed recall post-test when students use TMM to learn vocabulary

In analyzing the results of the first research question, a t-test was employed to identify whether or not there were significant differences in the number of words learnt between the pre-test and the delayed recall post-test using TMM among students. Table 1 indicates that the students obtained significantly higher scores in the delayed recall post-test (M = 18.27, SD = 4.461) than the pre-test (M= 13.46, SD = 4.460), $t(42) = -5.707, p = .000$. Such result is consistent with the study that employed WordChamp; a vocabulary language software, where it was found that students who used the software performed significantly better than the participants in the control group who practiced vocabulary in the traditional way (Kilickaya & Krajka 2010). However, the finding stood in contrast with Chia and Ying's (2000) study in which it was reported that students who used computers were not able to memorize the words they learnt after a 40-day treatment was conducted. Yet, those in the conventional method were found to excel than their counterparts.

Table 1.Result of the Paired-Sample t-test before and after using TMM.

	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Pre-test	43	13.46	4.46	-5.70	42	.000
Delayed Recall Post-test	43	18.27	4.46			

Students’ preferences of using TMM for learning vocabulary

In relation to the preferences of using TMM, the students claimed that the drag-and-drop feature was useful in the quest to find the correct answers. A target word was dragged to a blank space in a sentence to see whether or not it was suitable to be placed in the location. Jenny described, “I insert the words which I know first, then only I put the one which I don’t know. Consequently, it led her to identify the meaning of the target word, “That way, I can know the meaning of the word”. In using the feature, she randomly dragged a target word and dropped it in the blank space, “I randomly drag everything into the blank spaces. If the word I insert is wrong, I drag some other words into the blank space”. It was also a repetitive process, “I repeat and repeat doing this until I find the correct answer”. She felt triumph if the answer she dragged was correct, “It’s my technique which I think works! I give seven out of ten point scales because playing around with those words, sometimes makes me remember the words more. Yeah, it helps me a lot”. Another student; Andrew, performed the same procedures. He said:

I think dragging and dropping answers does help me because... for me right, when I insert the word that I don’t understand or I don’t know the meaning of, certainly the word I insert will be wrong. So I just insert words that I know first. Then after that, I’ll insert the word which I’m not sure of. If I know the answer to be put in the blank space, I cannot insert anymore into it. So by using this method I can some sort of insert the word at the right place

According to Godwin-Jones (2011), the use of drag-and-drop is an advanced feature that can support language learning. In his review of language learning devices, it is stated that Lonely Planet - a travel guide, that integrates drag-and-drop feature enables its uses i.e. non-native speakers to access trip planners when they go abroad.

Challenges faced by students in using TMM

Data collected from two students who obtained low scores (known as Misa and Ain) is employed to answer Research Question 3. In general, they felt that the fair amount of British-English pronunciation (native speaker) in TMM was difficult as they were expected to model the slang. It required them to ensure that their intonations and pitch were similar to the slang, and therefore, could be detected by the software. Misa voiced out her dissatisfaction in relation to this issue. She asserted:

For the word, ‘catamaran’ for instance, I already uttered it correctly, but the programme still requested me to repeat uttering the word. The ‘Speak’ button on top of the screen would respond, “I didn’t understand you”. I think we need to use ‘pure’ British slang. I supposed that was the reason it could not detect what we said. I think to talk like the English by using Tell Me More is difficult. Sometimes I was fed up as well.

In supporting this result, Nation (1990) argued that although the knowledge of a word includes knowing its pronunciation, the use of native speakers’ accent in teaching the students to pronounce the words as in using TMM, however, created a problem to the poor students in the present study. Such finding was consistent with a study that found pronouncing words in British accent was a problem among Malaysian students since in the country, majority of its citizens were exposed to American accent in various medium of entertainments, and hence, they were more familiar with pronouncing words using American accent (Melor Md. Yunus, Harwati Hashim, Kamaruzaman Jusoff, Norazah Mohd Nordin, Ruhizan M Yasin & Saemah Rahman 2010). The teacher-researchers in the study also commented that the use of British accent in TMM was not suitable as some of the pronunciations were different from Malaysian English. The fact that TMM could only be used when students were in the Multimedia Language Labs was another challenge faced by students when they used TMM to learn vocabulary. Such was due to it could only be used with the presence of the teachers as the labs’ doors could only be accessed by authorised personnel. Such conditions, denied students to use the programme elsewhere in the campus or in their free time. Ain commented:

At the moment, we could do the exercise in the lab only, right? Aaa...it would be better if we could do the exercise in the room... in the hostel. If possible, give the software to us so that we can do the exercise. When we have spare time...we can use it in the hostel. This way, it facilitates our memory to remember meaning of target words”

Likewise, for Misa, she felt that the limited access to the programme restrained her from doing the exercise in the hostel. She told, “We couldn’t use Tell Me More in the hostel. If we want to practice again, it would be difficult because we could only use it in the labs... time was not sufficient to do all the exercises during lessons”.



In addition, the poor students claimed that there was no link between the target words with their meanings. In other words, there was no hypertexts for target words – a feature which students perceived could assist them in knowing the meaning of target words. The absence of the hypertext required Misa to read all the sentences in the Fill-in-the-blanks activity, “*I read all the sentences in the Vocabulary Workshop since the software does not provide meaning or dictionary*”

Ain added that providing meaning of a target word would ease her understanding. She further commented that having the target word to be translated is helpful as well. She said:

If there is meaning it would be much easier... Just provide a hyperlink for meaning of the target words. Bahasa Malaysia and also English translation.

Ain also believed that knowing the pronunciation of the target words were not sufficient. She perceived that the software would benefit the students better if there were links for the target words, “*We just know the pronunciation only. We didn't know the meaning of the word. I think it is much better if meanings were provided to all the words*”.

It seemed that integrating hypertext in TMM for meaning was necessary. The convenience uses of hypertext in understanding the meanings of words corroborated a research that found that having such link enabled the first year university students to infer the meanings of target words (Koren 1997). Interestingly, the use of hypertexts is seen as useful for male students, rather than female, since the former were more inclined to use hypertext dictionaries to know the meaning of the vocabulary (Haseltine 2006).

CONCLUSION

The study showed that there was an increase of vocabulary knowledge when students used TMM. The study also concluded that the challenges of TMM outweighed their preferences of using the tool in learning vocabulary. Yet, no one could possibly take exception that students showed more positive attitude when they learnt using computers rather than dictionary or guessing meaning from context in learning vocabulary (Ali, Mukundan, Baki & Ayub 2012). The implication from the current study calls local language teachers as well as developers to produce a software that integrates vocabularies obtain from homegrown. This is evident in the case of the poor students in the current study when she was not able to utter the word; ‘catamaran’, thereby creating a bored session when they were required to use TMM. In this case, it seems that having the word to be replaced with ‘raft’ or ‘sailboat’ are much easier to be pronounced.

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