

Using the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews to Improve Students' Performance during Mock Job Interviews*

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ABSTRACT

Many job candidates often face a lot of anxiety when handling a job interview due to lack of confidence and preparation, resulting in poor performance during an interview. To improve overall performance in job interviews, a self-learning kit *Dare to be Interviewed* was developed to engage students in self-learning and self-practice. To find out the impact of the learning kit in boosting students' confidence and performance, an action research was carried out with a group of Diploma in Business Management students of the Seberang Perai Polytechnic. Results indicated an increase in students' level of confidence and overall performance with the use of the self-learning kit. This signifies the impact of self-learning in increasing motivation and confidence that help job seekers to ace an interview.

INTRODUCTION

Making graduates of the polytechnic more employable and marketable has always been a major concern of the Department of Polytechnic Education, Ministry of Education Malaysia. Various efforts are made to achieve the target of ensuring 75 percent of polytechnic graduates are employed within six months after their graduation in line with the mission highlighted in The National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia [1]. The curriculum for one is designed to achieve the Key Performance Indicator (KPI). Students of the polytechnics are taught job hunting skills in semester five, where preparing and handling job interviews are among the topics taught. Using mock interviews students are given the practice on how to prepare and handle job interview questions. However, due to a lack of confidence and inadequate preparation, students do not seem to perform well during the mock interview sessions. Many students relate their poor performance to the lack of preparation on their part and the high level of anxiety and nervousness they experienced during a mock interview session. This is in congruence with an observation that lack of preparation constitutes 75% of the fear felt during an interview [2]. Hence, classroom instruction should emphasize on the need to make adequate preparation before a mock job interview and extra efforts should follow outside the classrooms to make up for the limited time available for in class practice. Students should be encouraged to be independent and to take charge of their own learning using self-access resources to complement what is learnt and practiced in the classrooms. Meyer et. al [3] reviewed literature on independent learning and found "the key ingredient in independent learning was the shift of responsibility for the learning process from the teacher to the student." They also noted evidence of benefits of students learning independently as improved motivation and better academic performance. A study from Netherlands was cited as "students in self-regulated learning environments are more motivated to learn, report more enjoyment of the material and are more effectively involved in their learning than those who study in more restrictive environments." [3]

Thus the *Dare to be Interviewed: a training and self-learning kit for Job Interviews* [4] was developed to encourage self-learning and self-practice amongst students and to complement classroom teaching so that students can be better prepared for an interview session. Using the learning kit students learn to face job interviews by preparing and practicing the essentials of a job interview. Hence this action research was undertaken to investigate the impact of the learning kit on students' overall performance in mock interviews.

RESEARCH RATIONALE

In the Malaysian polytechnics TVET context, the topic on Job hunting skills was taught over a period of two weeks and a mock interview was carried out at the end of the second week. A total of six hours was spent on the topic but it was found to be not sufficient in giving ample practice before the mock interview session. Students were found to be not well prepared during the mock job interview causing them to be nervous and lacking in confidence. They could also answer only about 50% of the questions asked during the mock job interview out of the 80% as per required in the rubrics. Hence, a self-learning kit, *Dare to be Interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit* [4] was introduced to complement classroom teaching in providing the extra practice needed on the basis that self-learning could enhance practice given during classroom teaching.

This action research aims to find out whether the *Dare to be interviewed: a training and self-learning kit for Job Interviews* [4] was able to help students in preparing and practicing before a mock interview session that eventually could help improve their overall performance and increase their level of confidence in a mock interview.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of the action research is to find out whether the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a training and self-learning kit for Job Interviews* [4] could improve students' overall performance and confidence during mock job interviews.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research aims to answer the following questions:

1. Does students' overall performance in a mock job interview improve with the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews*?
2. Does students' confidence during a mock job interview increase with the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning kit for Job Interviews*?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Securing a high-end job with multi-national companies upon completion of a TVET programme is a challenge. Job seekers not only need to display technical competencies but also other competencies that make them stand out from other job candidates. Communication skills and other soft skills are as equally important as technical skills as these skills portray a candidate's personality and outlook [5, 6, 7, 8]. Hence, they are given much attention among employers even as early as at the stage of a job interview session. However, polytechnic graduates do not seem to possess good communication skills and often fall short of creating a good impression at job interviews. Zaharatul Akmar Ahmad Zainuddin and Suzanah Selamat [6,p.78] observed "in reality graduates are finding difficult to communicate during job interviews and when they are lucky enough to secure a job they are unable to advance themselves due to a lack of communication skills." They also concluded that there is a mismatch between polytechnic students' ability in communication and what is expected by potential employers. [6]

Dissatisfaction among employers was not only expressed on students' poor communication skills but also on other work-related specific communication skills such as presentation skills informal discussions,

public speeches and interviews [9]. The ability to contribute in problem-solving and decision making are among the soft skills found to be lacking among Malaysian Polytechnic students [5, 10]. Riam [10, p. 50] pointed out in her study, “students’ soft skills level of competency has yet to meet employers’ expectations.”

On the contrary, a study by Esa Ahmad et. al [8] found a different perspective on the level of soft skills of the Malaysian Polytechnic engineering students which was reported at a high level. Results of their study indicated that leadership skills and teamwork skills were at a high level and communication skills, lifelong learning and information management, problem solving skills and entrepreneurship skills were at a moderate level. They [8, p. 491] concluded that the “Outcome based approach adopted by the polytechnics were effective in applying soft skills to students as a preparation to meet the demands of employers.” Another study conducted by Zaharatul Akmar Ahmad Zainuddin and Suzanah Selamat [6] to find out polytechnic students’ attitude towards interpersonal communication skills and their level of awareness in terms of workplace etiquette, paralanguage and conversation skills, discovered that “students seem to be quite knowledgeable on interpersonal communication skills and know how to communicate appropriately at workplace...” [6, p. 84]

What then could possibly be the reason for the discrepancy? If job seekers to a certain extent have had the knowledge and skills needed, what could possibly affect their performance during their job search and why can’t they display good communication skills and generic skills at job interviews? Zaharatul Akmar Ahmad Zainuddin and Suzanah Selamat [6] remarked, “even though polytechnic students are briefed on how to attend job interviews, employers comment that that the students do not know how to apply this knowledge during actual interviews.” [6, p. 84]. There may be several variables ranging from physiological to sociological factors that may affect one’s performance but recent studies are giving attention to psychological factors that might influence job candidates’ performance at an interview. Jacobs M.M and Anthony R. [11] listed “being interviewed for a job” as an interpersonal situation which may trigger anxiety. Feeling anxious at a job interview may cause uneasiness, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, racing heart, panic and all those negative feelings of not being able to cope with the stressful situations [11, 12, 13]. However, experts believe that interview anxiety is normal and hits most people but it can be conquered.

Conquering Job Interview Anxiety

The thought of being evaluated and judged by someone of authority would already cause job applicants to feel uncontrollably worried. Cowden [14] explained, when feeling anxious they would have negative views about their ability to cope with the stressful situation, they become fearful and excessively feel concern on whether they can perform competently. Dr. Deborah Powell, a psychology professor of University of Guelph mentioned in Nauert [15], agreed that anxiety impairs candidates ability to perform in job interviews, she further explained, “anxiety may show up as nervous tics, difficulty in speaking and trouble in coming up with answers, all which are known to influence hiring outcomes.”

However, these negative feelings of anxiousness and nervousness can be reduced if not eliminated. Cole [13] mentioned “beating interview stress is not about being perfect or about being fear-free. It’s about adjusting and managing your anxiety and using it to fuel your performance.” He recommended several steps in conquering interview stress among which are creating a mental training system that will help the mind in taking control of the situation by staying positive even when under pressure and by doing mental adjustments to improve performance. Robin [2] too felt that fear during job interviews can be overcome if adequate preparations are made. People who confront job interviews with adequate preparations will very likely feel less nervous and less stressed out. Preparations made through continuous practice would reduce anxiety and helps boost confidence in handling job interviews.

Preparing for Job Interviews through Self-Learning

Studies have shown the importance of preparation in boosting job employment interview. Preparations for an interview may involve a lot of practice such as in anticipating questions and researching and learning about the company. Practicing can be done through a variety of activities inside or outside the classroom. Hansen et al [16] concluded that those students who have better interview skills than others may have dedicated more effort to interview preparation than others. Several preparatory activities introduced to a Junior Level Business Communication class had impacted on the students’ confidence and

performance. They observed an increase in students' confidence as they approached a mock interview after going through several preparatory activities. Though the correlation between the activities and the mock job interview performance was not investigated, they noted an increase in confidence as a result of the preparatory exercises as the students approached a mock interview. [16]

In preparing for a mock interview, students needed the time to practice over and over again and this can be encouraged through self-learning and self-practice. A review of literature by Meyer et al [3] on independent learning, often discussed as 'personalization' or student-centred learning', highlighted evidence of improved performance, motivation and confidence. Independent learning does not mean students working alone but more of taking ownership in learning with the support of the teacher. By establishing an 'enabling environment' students engaged themselves in active learning using appropriate resources in which ICT can be an important element. Studies in their review suggested that ICT can enhance independent learning. The role of ICT was noted as being helpful in increasing the speed of access of information and as a medium of interaction between learners and between learners and their teachers.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA GATHERING PROCEDURES

Data collected from classroom observation, evaluation, supervision and reflection offer an abundance of information leading to better classroom behavior and instruction. Sue Nair [17, p. 25-44] explained "teacher research can be distinguished from academic research in terms of focus for the first is concerned with the improvement of specific practice whereas the other reflects a desire to achieve validity and generalization." Hence, an action research was employed in an attempt to focus on whether students' performance in mock interviews could be improved through self-learning with the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4]. Scores indicating students' performance in a mock interview session prior to the use of the self-learning kit were compared to the scores of a mock interview after the use of the self-learning kit to see if there was an impact in performance as a result of using the kit. A structured interview was also carried out to find out whether students' level of confidence had increased after the use of the learning kit.

Over a period of two weeks, eight students selected through a purposeful sampling procedure as explained by Patton [18, p. 51] were asked to engage themselves in self-learning by using the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4] repeatedly at their own time and convenience. They were asked to write journal entries describing what they gained and how they felt about using the self-learning kit each time they used the learning kit. A post-mock interview was then carried out and the scores obtained during the post-mock interview were compared to the scores obtained during the pre-mock interview session, before the introduction of the kit.

Selection of subjects

Eight students of Diploma in Business Management in the sixth semester who had undergone a mock interview were involved in the research. These students had been identified as scoring between average marks to low marks during a recent mock interview session held.

Self-Learning Kit

A self-learning kit entitled *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4] that had been developed to help students prepare and practice for a mock job interview was used as a self-learning material over duration of two weeks of the research. The kit comprised a user guide, a handbook and an e-book in DVD format. Contents of the e-book presented in multimedia include, Types of Interviews, Purposes of Interviews, Preparing for Interviews, Practising for Interviews and Promoting Yourself at an Interview.

Rubrics

The Standardized rubrics for mock interview assessment produced as assessment guidelines by the Curriculum, Instructional and Assessment Division in the Department of Polytechnic Education [19] were used to score the students' performance during the mock interview prior to the research. The scores were tabulated and eight students scoring from average to low were identified as subjects in the research. The

same rubrics were used again to score the students' performance during the post mock interview that was after the use of the self-learning kit by the eight selected students. The scores were again tabulated and comparisons were made to determine whether there was an increase in scores indicating improvement in students' performance in answering job interview questions.

Journal Entries

The eight participating students were asked to make journal entries at each time they used the self-learning kit, recording how they felt about using the kit and whether they noticed their own improvement as a result of using the kit. The journal entries were collected at the end of the two weeks and analyzed impressionistically by drawing conclusions on whether the kit had had helped in increasing students' level of confidence.

Interview Questions

Four out of the eight participating students were interviewed in a structured manner to gauge their level of confidence in the post mock interview. The interview questions were derived based on the common symptoms associated with interview stress as recorded by Cole [13]. Eight questions were asked and their responses were recorded and transcribed. The transcription of the interview responses were analyzed and salient points were noted and categorized under the following themes; feelings during a mock interview session and perception towards self-practice before a mock interview session.

Questionnaire

Using the symptoms of interview stress listed in a 75-item self-assessment in the Interview Performance Stress Assessment produced by Cole [13] a questionnaire consisting of ten questions with a Likert scale of four options *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree* was self-developed to gauge students' level of confidence in handling mock job interviews. The questionnaire was distributed and answered by the eight participating students after the post mock interview session. The responses were counted using a tally sheet and the results were discussed under the same themes; feelings during a mock interview session and perception towards self-practice before a mock interview session.

The table below summarized the data gathering procedures:

Table 1: Data Gathering Procedures in summary

Research questions	Instruments	Subjects	Data Analysis Procedure
1. Does students' overall performance in a mock job interview improved with the use of the <i>Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standardized Assessment Rubrics 	8 students	Comparison of Scores obtained in a pre-mock interview and a post mock interview sessions
2. Does students' confidence during a mock job interview increase with the use of the <i>Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Journal entries 	4 students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impressionistic analysis of Journal entries
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structured Interview 	4 students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transcription of interview responses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Questionnaire 	8 students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tally count

DATA ANALYSIS

Data obtained from the four instruments used in the data gathering procedures namely the standardized assessment rubrics, questionnaire, structured interview, and the journal entries were analysed using qualitative and quantitative measurements accordingly.

Scores from the Standardised assessment rubrics for the pre-mock interview and the post-mock interview were tabulated and compared to trace if there was an increase in scores between the two mock interview sessions. The differences in scores were marked as increased, decreased or no change. The number of students who showed an increase in scores was aggregated in percentage. Responses from the questionnaire were counted using frequency count and a tally sheet. On the other hand, data obtained from the structured interview and the journal entries were analysed qualitatively. King et. al [20, p. 120] gives some guidelines on how responses to open-ended questions can be analysed systematically. These guidelines were followed to ensure the rich data from open-ended responses can be fully utilised for an accurate portrayal of the impact of the intervention which was the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4]. Responses from the structured interview were transcribed in verbatim and analysed descriptively under two themes; feelings during a mock interview session and perception towards self-practice before a mock interview session. Data from the journal entries was also analysed descriptively. Each journal entry was given an identification number. This was done to enable the researcher to return to the original source, to locate and check exact wording when the need arose. General conclusions were drawn impressionistically and discussed under the same themes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Generally the findings from all the four instruments used, the standardized assessment rubrics, questionnaire, structured interview, and the journal entries showed a positive impact from the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4], in improving their overall performance in a mock interview session. The standardized assessment rubrics used to measure the differences in scores between the pre-mock interview and the post mock interview showed a significant increase in scores while the results of the questionnaire showed a positive feedback on handling a mock interview session. Responses from the structured interview and the journal entries recorded an increase in confidence in the post mock interview and that the students acknowledged the impact of the learning kit on their preparation and performance in the post mock interview session.

Details of the findings were discussed below to answer the research questions:

Does students' overall performance in a mock job interview improve with the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews*?

The scores from the standardized assessment rubrics used to measure students' performance in the pre mock interview and the post mock interview were tabulated and compared and it was found out that all eight students showed a marked difference in performance. Their scores had increased in all the four categories assessed, *professional ethics, impression, response to questions and language*. The increase of scores in the category of *professional ethics* indicated that the students had been able to wear appropriate attire for an interview. They had learnt to greet the interviewer at the beginning of the mock interview session and to thank the interviewer at the end of the mock interview session. They had also managed to prepare and organized their documents well in clear folders. The improved scores in the *impression category* showed that the students were able to display appropriate body language and postures throughout the interview sessions and had also been able to display good eye contact with the interviewer. The increase in scores also reflected that the students had become more confident in handling the interview session. While in the *response to questions* category all eight students had shown improvement in their overall ability to respond to interview questions when they could answer at least 80% of the questions as compared to their earlier records of being able to answer 50% to 60% of the job interview questions asked. The quality of responses to the questions had also increased when they were able to relate working skills to the job well. The language used had also been noted to be better when their scores for the language category too, showed an increase. However, scores for language category showed only a slight increase indicating that the students need to further work on their language use in

the aspects of language accuracy in producing responses with less grammatical errors and in the aspect of language fluency in reducing hesitations and minimising slips in pronunciation.

In general it could be concluded that students' ability in answering mock job interview questions had to a certain extent increased with self-practice through the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews*. [4]

Does students' confidence during a mock job interview increase with the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews*?

Encouraging results from the questionnaire, answered by all eight students, showed an overall positive impact of the self-practice they had from the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit* [4]. Responses from the same questionnaire administered before the post mock interview and after the post mock interview were compared to find out what their feelings were during a mock interview session.

A 100% of them responded that they were well-prepared for the post mock interview as compared to 75% who responded that they were well prepared in the pre mock interview session. 75% of the students agreed and 25% strongly agreed that they were well prepared for the post mock interview. All eight students responded that they were at ease when answering the questions asked at the post mock job interview. This indicated better preparations were made for the post mock interview as compared to the pre mock interview where only one out of eight or 13% of the students claimed to be well prepared.

All eight students responded that they felt confident when answering the questions asked at the post mock job interview and that they could answer most of the questions asked. 63% of the students marked "agree" for the item *I felt confident when answering the questions* and 38% of them marked "strongly agree". All of the students responded that they could answer most of the questions asked where 75% marked "agreed" and 25% of them marked "strongly agree". This was found to be in line with the remarks they made when responding to the structured interview question on how they felt during the interview. The physical reactions they observed about themselves during the post mock interview also reflected that they were confident when answering the post mock interview questions. When asked whether their hands were wet or whether they perspired during the post mock interview session most of them remarked that they were at ease and did not notice any excessive perspiration or sweaty palms. One of the students Izza (pseudonym) remarked, "I thought my hands were a bit sweaty just before or at the initial part of the post mock interview...as it progressed I was at ease and did not really sweat." Another student Ain (pseudonym) also mentioned "...no... I did not perspire; I did not feel that the interview was too long."

Results of the questionnaire also noted a better experience for the students during the post- mock interview as compared to what they experienced during the pre-mock interview. A 100% of the students did not feel stressful. 88% of the students marked "Disagree" and 12% marked "Strongly Disagree" for the item *I felt stressful about being interviewed*. The majority also did not feel too nervous, 75% marked "disagree" and 25% marked "agree" for the item *I was nervous when answering questions*. However, 38% of the students still marked 'agree' for the item *I was worried about the mock interview questions*. This was found to be consistent with their journal log entries where they noted that that they gained more confidence as they practiced and that their anxiety level lowered as they became more ready to respond to the job interview questions they anticipated. One student wrote in her journal entry, "People say practice makes perfect, now I know how much self-practice can be a real help, I guessed doing some rehearsing for the responses to the anticipated job interview questions had its impact."

Generally although three of the students still felt worried about attending an interview but results of the questionnaire indicated that they were less worried in the post mock interview as compared to how worried they felt when attending the pre-mock interview. 50% of the students disagreed with item two of the questionnaire; *I was worried about the mock interview session*. 38% agreed and 12% strongly agreed that the mock interview session was worrying them.

The data, comments and feedback, obtained from the questionnaire responses, the structured interview and the journal log entries generally had shown some positive impact from the self-practice gained through using the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4]. To a

certain extent the findings had shown an increase in confidence and a notable difference in students' overall performance with the use of the learning kit.

With regards to this a student's comments in one of the journal log entries worth to be noted when it was remarked,

“There is no way to easily and quickly put myself completely ready for job interviews and this Dare to be interviewed training and self-learning kit is not a breakthrough product that is going to change the fact but I am sure this product will go a long way in helping someone like me to learn, prepare and grab some important points and information, at the same time, put my mind ready to practice before real interviews.”

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Findings of the research were found to be in line with what other researchers had discovered on the importance of preparation in boosting the confidence and performance of students and jobseekers. The research confirmed that some amount of preparation by means of self-practice had impacted on the students' overall performance in the post mock interview session. The scores obtained in the post mock interview session showed an overall improvement in performance as compared to the scores obtained during the pre-mock interview session. The students' level of confidence too had increased when they appeared better prepared at the post mock interview session. The feedback gathered through the structured interview and the journal log entries analysed, reflected a lowered anxiety level and an increased confidence level among the students with the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4]. The improvements noted in the four categories evaluated, *professional ethics, impression, response to questions and language* showed that to a certain extent preparations made prior to a mock interview session had inevitably improved the overall performance of the students and that the use of the self-learning kit had been impactful.

On the other hand the research too had opened up a new avenue of exploration on students' dependency on a teacher in improving their language use. Although it was noted that their effort in engaging in self-practice had brought about an improvement in the quality of responses to the questions asked during the mock interview session, it was also found out that the language used in responding to the questions was not found to be any better than the language used in the earlier pre-mock interview session. It seemed that language accuracy did not improve as much as the ability to provide related responses to the job being applied. This was inferred as language practice with a teacher would be needed to complement students' self-practice using the self-learning kit. Teacher modelling on accurate pronunciation for instance would be important in minimising pronunciation problems when answering the questions asked. Even though slips in pronunciation did not hinder comprehension it could leave an undesirable impression on an interviewer. The use of grammatically correct sentences too would also be another matter to be looked into as accuracy is just as much important as fluency in making effective responses to interview questions. This would again indicate that other forms of activities could be employed to complement and further enhance the improvements made through self-practice by means of using the self-learning kit. Hansen et al [16] remarked “multiple interventions bolster interview performance.”

Generally it can be concluded that the research had to a certain extent addressed the two research questions on whether students' overall performance could be improved and on whether students' level of confidence could be increased through self-practice with the use of the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit for Job Interviews* [4]. The findings had indicated a positive impact on the students' overall performance in the post mock interview session with the use of the learning kit. However, it is recommended that the learning value gained by using the *Dare to be interviewed: a Training and Self-Learning Kit* [4] be optimised by complementing self-learning with other learning activities.

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