

Students' Perceptions on the Use of Mobile Learning to Improve Writing Proficiency in the MUET

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) has been used as a tool to measure students' proficiency in the English language. It serves as a prerequisite for entry to tertiary education, as well as a requirement for graduating students, particularly those pursuing a non ESL programme. Students' continuous poor performances in the writing component in MUET resulted in the revamp by the Malaysian Examination Council. In analysing the cause for such poor performances, this study aims to investigate pre-university students' perceptions on the use of mobile learning (e.g., learning via smartphone, iPad, tablet computer and Personal Digital Assistant) for writing. A total of 157 pre-university students from five national secondary schools in Betong, Sarawak were involved in this study. This study employed a mixed-method approach. The findings indicated that a majority of the students had positive perceptions on the use of mobile learning. The use of mobile learning could enhance the students' proficiency in English language. This is crucial because having excellent proficiency helps to improve students' writing skills and performance. By integrating the elements of ICT in learning, it also meets the Malaysian Education Blueprint necessity to maximise the use of ICT in the classroom; in line with the twenty-first century learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The essential role of English language in schools and tertiary institutions has been acknowledged long before Malaysia gained independence in 1957. Proficiency and competency in the language seem to be the passport to better academic achievement, career and life (Rethinasamy & Kee, 2011). With greater demand on the use of English in various arenas, it is a must to master the language. Realising this importance, various means are taken by local universities in the hope of assisting students to improve their proficiency in the English language. One of these means is through offering a series of English language exams namely, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). These are the compulsory tests for graduation requirements. In Malaysia, where English is officially taught as a second language, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is widely used as a benchmark to determine a student's proficiency in English. It also serves as a prerequisite to admission for tertiary education, as well as a condition for graduation. In schools, MUET is a compulsory test for sixth formers, currently known as pre-university students. However, MUET can be onerous especially in writing. This difficulty arises due to the first language interference and lexical weaknesses (Ponnudurai & De Rycker, 2012).

In the Malaysian English Language curriculum, writing is a fundamental skill that needs to be acquired and mastered by all

students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In spite of being exposed to English since primary level, many pre-university students remain poor in the language. This factor affects their ability to write well. It has always been a daunting task for them. The interference of the first language and their lack in academic vocabulary are very perceptible to Malaysian students. Due to these factors, it not only reduces the pleasure of reading, but also discourages students from writing (Tan et al., 2011). A report by the Malaysian Examination Council shows that 33.15% of 72701 candidates who sat for the November 2013 MUET paper only scored Band 3, classifying them as 'Modest User' (Bernama, 2014). This result is a cause of worry among both educators and parents. At the pre-university level, much credit is given to the writing component.

Today, the major advancement of technology has rapidly affected all areas of lives, particularly in the field of education. The traditional English language classroom has been transformed and diversified as technology has enabled the teachers to use various methodological and pedagogical strategies to conduct a fruitful teaching and learning process. Berk (2009) claimed that traditional classroom settings demotivated and disconnected almost 50% of high school students from their learning process. Under these circumstances, it is vital that teachers integrate information and communication technology (ICT) elements in their teaching and learning in order to cultivate students' interests in their writing lessons.

ICTs appear in various forms. Thus, the mobile device is seen as the right tool for fostering education because 90% of students below the age of 18 have access to mobile technology (Valk et al., 2010). Thus, integrating mobile learning with the teaching of writing is sound. Mobile learning is not foreign to educational technology and it can be applied for various subjects. It has been effectively proven to improve language skills (Azar & Nasiri, 2014). This revelation supports the claim made by Zaki and Md Yunus (2015) that stated the potential for learning writing using mobile learning was high. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to better understand the pre-university students' perceptions on the use of mobile learning using devices such as the smartphone, iPad, tablet computer and Personal Digital Assistant in the learning of writing skills for MUET.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysian University English Test (MUET)

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was first introduced in 1999 by the Ministry of Education and it is largely recognised in Malaysia and Singapore. The full implementation of the exam was in 2000. The Malaysian Examination Council is the national body responsible for overseeing and administering the exam. In Malaysian national schools, pre-university students, consisting of Lower Six and Upper Six students, have to sit for the MUET. It is a prerequisite requirement for Malaysian public university admission (Rethinasamy & Kee, 2011).

Having a full mandate on the implementation of MUET, the Malaysian Examination Council (2005) stated that the MUET aimed to gauge pre-university students' proficiency in English and bridged the gap between language and communication needs especially between secondary and tertiary education. Integrating the MUET into the pre-university syllabus is one of many ways to help students improve their language competence as well as foster their higher order thinking skills. This is in line with the aspiration of the Malaysia Education Blueprint to develop first class human capital (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

The MUET assesses students' competence in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In 2008, the Malaysian Examination Council revamped the format for MUET so that it would be aligned with the specification emphasised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia. The first test based on the new MUET specifications was administered in November 2008. Since 2012, the exam has been conducted thrice a year, in March, July and November (Kok et al., 2013).

Students' Writing Performance in MUET

The rapid decline in the English language in Malaysian schools is a cause for worry for everyone concerned. Left unchecked, the country would lose its competitiveness in the field of technology and industry. In the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the Ministry of Education

Malaysia (2013) is committed to equip young Malaysians with knowledge, who utilise higher order thinking skills, possess leadership skills and most importantly, have the ability to communicate in English. Thus, it is essential for pre-university students to achieve a good score in the MUET to fulfill those aspirations. However, researches have shown that pre-university students encounter problems in the writing component in English in the MUET.

Kaur and Nordin (2006) had stated that the achievement of students in the MUET writing component had been unsatisfactory. The finding from their study showed that 29.2% of the 120,000 graduates managed to score Bands One and Two in their MUET, categorising them as 'Extremely Limited User' and 'Limited User' respectively. The researchers also found that language incompetence was the main factor that contributed to the poor performance in writing.

Other researchers, Lee Allen and Lee (2011) carried out a research on the involvement of higher order thinking skills in the MUET among 55 pre-university students. They were provided with a comprehensive questionnaire, a detailed interview with an expert and an assessment of the syllabus specifically selected for the MUET preparation course. The study revealed that students had low synthesis skill. This skill is vital in writing as it enables students to generate ideas in order to be a critical and creative thinker for writing (Langan, 2005).

The study by Tan et al. (2011) on the effects of reciprocal teaching strategies on reading comprehension also revealed that students who had a low proficiency in English could not comprehend the reading texts in the MUET. As the students could not read or comprehend the texts independently, they also could not extract and process the information effectively. This skill is linked to writing. Hence, it can be concluded that students must possess good reading skills in order to write fluently.

Similarly, a study done by Omar et al. (2013) revealed that a majority of the pre-university students had yet to master the writing skills demanded in the MUET. Additionally, the analysis of the open-ended responses given by the students showed that a lack of vocabulary was the main reason for poor report writing. Based on these researches, there is an urgent need to improve writing proficiency among pre-university students.

Benefits of Using Mobile Learning in Enhancing Writing

In the twenty first century learning, the use of ICT in classrooms is not a strange phenomenon. The Ministry of Education Malaysia (2013) reported that they had spent more than RM6 billion on ICT over the past decade for educational purposes. Through this investment, it is hoped that students will benefit from its impact as they will have unlimited access to educational contents that are not only current but also more engaging and interactive in nature. ICT facilities will be ever present in schools. There will be no

disparity between urban and rural schools, and all teachers and students alike would be equipped with the required and essential technological skills. There are many forms of ICT and one of the most popular is the mobile device. According to Valk et al. (2010), a mobile device can be a beneficial tool for education advancement. Zaki and Md Yunus (2015) who shared the same view, added that mobile learning had great potential for use in academic writing.

There are numerous benefits to using a mobile to improve writing skills. First, learning using mobile devices can sustain a high level of student's engagement in the teaching and learning process. Current mobile devices are usually equipped with high resolution digital production features like the camera, video and audio recorder. Apart from that, there is the availability of applications that are educational in nature. These interactive multimedia tools can improve students' engagement in the teaching and learning process (Hlodan, 2010; Liu et al., 2014). When students are actively engaged in the learning process, it will motivate them to complete the tasks, leading to a positive impact in their writing performance (Embi et al., 2013).

Secondly, learning a language using mobile devices also promotes interactive and interesting writing activities. Studies by Yovanoff et al. (2005) and Ashrafzadeh and Nimehchisalem (2015) showed that the core problems faced by ESL learners in their mastering of writing skills in English were a lack of vocabulary and poor grammar. The integration of mobile learning in

the teaching of writing, as suggested by Zhang (2015), could help to solve these problems. Nowadays, mobile devices are designed with many good and up-to-date applications which could help students practise their writing and grammar skills while offering them opportunities for fun learning. This will make the writing process more stimulating.

Thirdly, mobile learning provides sufficient learning materials and supports the writing process. Students usually need to search for a lot of information during the planning and drafting stages before they can write a good piece. With the help of mobile technology, students can effectively access various online resources which could help them to generate more ideas and gain information on the topic (Zhang, 2015). It is less time consuming as students can easily access online dictionary and thesaurus which provide additional support for writing (Liu et al., 2014).

Last but not least, mobile learning saves time. With the rapid advancement of technology, students will find it easier to complete their writing task. Chang and Hsu (2011) explained that mobile learning enabled students to initiate their learning process without the constraints of time. Today, the growth of mobile devices with advanced features places the learning process in the students' hands. Hence, mobile learning is considered to be flexible which will provide more opportunities for the students to improve their writing skills at their own pace. In short, it can be said that mobile learning facilitates students'

acquisition of knowledge that in turn, facilitates the writing skills.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The key objective of the study is to investigate pre-university students' perceptions on the use of mobile learning in the writing component of the MUET. The fundamental questions addressed in this study are:

- what are pre-university students' perceptions on the use of mobile learning to learn writing skills for the MUET?
- how mobile learning can be fully utilised by pre-university students as an effective tool in learning writing skills for the MUET?

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study is a mixed-method design. One hundred and fifty seven (157) pre-university students from five national secondary schools in Betong, the eleventh administrative division in Sarawak, participated in the study. The English language proficiency of these students differed and their selection was based on convenience sampling. Questionnaire and open-ended questions were used as the main instruments of this study. Some items in the questionnaire were adopted from the two studies entitled 'Students' Perceptions of Edmodo and Mobile Learning and Their Real Barriers Towards Them' by Al-Said (2015) and 'Language Learners Perceptions and Experiences on the Use of Mobile Applications for Independent Language Learning in Higher Education' by Nino

(2015). In order to obtain comprehensive and required data, students were also required to answer four open-ended questions stated in the questionnaire. The questions were viewed and commented by the subject experts; a lecturer from a public university and a School Improvement Specialist Coach from the district education office. The assessment from these experts is of utmost importance in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the questions used in this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are divided into three parts; general background of the respondents, pre-university students' perceptions on the use of mobile learning and the utilisation of mobile learning in MUET writing. A frequency distribution of data obtained from the Likert-style items questionnaire is presented in a table and only the relevant findings are highlighted.

General Background of the Respondents

One hundred and fifty seven (157) respondents from the Science and Arts streams participated in this study. They have already undertaken the Malaysian Certificate of Education, which is a national examination taken by Form Five students. A frequency data was used to analyse the results of the study.

Based on Table 1, it can be concluded that students' English proficiency level was mostly of average level. 38.2% of the students were in favour of reading. In

Table 1

General background of respondents

	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	71	45.2
	Female	86	54.8
	Total	157	100
English language proficiency	Excellent	2	1.3
	Good	26	16.6
	Average	79	50.3
	Fair	31	19.7
	Poor	19	12.1
	Total	157	100
Favourite MUET component	Reading	60	38.2
	Writing	26	16.6
	Listening	14	8.9
	Speaking	57	36.3
	Total	157	100

MUET, the reading assessment format only requires students to answer multiple-choice test items. The listening component was least favoured among the respondents (8.9%) probably because of its little weightage in MUET.

Pre-university Students’ Perceptions on the Use of Mobile Learning

This section presents students’ perceptions on the use of mobiles for the learning of writing skills for MUET. A total of six items were asked to the respondents and the results are presented in Table 2.

Based on the Table depicted above (Table 2), the students showed positive perceptions towards the use of mobile learning in the learning of writing skills for

the MUET. A total of 82.8% of the students agreed that they had knowledge of mobile learning. This finding is in accordance to the study conducted by Valk et al. (2010) which stated that 90 percent of students had access to mobile technology. Thus, it is no surprise that the students had the ability to make efficient use of mobile for learning. The findings also revealed that 79.6% of the students agreed that the use of mobile learning was relevant. Mobile device could be seen as a convenient tool to replace the use of computer or laptop in learning writing skills. The result was supported by two students, who said:

The use of mobile learning is relevant because all students have their own mobile. We can do learning anytime and anywhere

Table 2

Pre-university students' perceptions on the use of mobile learning

Statement	Strongly Disagree and Disagree N (%)	Uncertain N (%)	Agree and Strongly Agree N (%)
Relevance		32 (20.4)	125 (79.6)
Knowledge on mobile learning	2 (1.3)	25 (15.9)	130 (82.8)
Effectiveness	3 (1.9)	67 (42.7)	87 (55.4)
Enjoyment		54 (34.4)	103 (65.6)
Easiness		38 (24.2)	119 (75.8)
Searching for different writing apps	6 (3.8)	60 (38.2)	91 (57.9)

because it is easier to bring mobile than textbook or dictionary.

(Respondent 7)

I don't have to bring a lot of stuff such as books, pen or any examination sheets for writing to school every day. I just need only my smartphone to accomplish all the tasks. I strongly agree on the use of mobile learning in learning writing for MUET.

(Respondent 89)

Despite having knowledge on the use of mobile learning, only 55.4% of the students opined that using mobile learning increased the effectiveness of learning writing for MUET. The students probably did not have enough knowledge on the yardstick for gauging its effectiveness.

Overall, the findings in Table 2 may be interpreted positively as the majority of students had a positive perception of mobile learning. This is apparent because the

range was from 55% to 83%. The fact that students had knowledge of mobile learning simply shows that they fully maximised the use of ICT in their learning. This is in line with the twenty-first century learning skills suggested by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2013). It is also undeniable that using mobile to learn writing skill is relevant to the students. This could lead to the betterment of students' performance in the writing component in MUET. This had been verified by Azar and Nasiri (2014) who pointed out that mobile learning could boost writing skills.

The Utilisation of Mobile Learning

This section presents some aspects of how mobile learning can be fully utilised as an effective tool in learning writing for MUET. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

The utilisation of mobile learning

Statements	Strongly Disagree and Disagree N (%)	Uncertain N (%)	Agree and Strongly Agree N (%)
Writing development	1 (0.6)	34 (21.7)	122 (77.7)
Creating enjoyable learning environment		23 (14.6)	134 (85.3)
Generating interest to learn writing	1 (0.6)	29 (18.5)	127 (80.9)
Improving English language proficiency	1 (0.6)	19 (12.1)	137 (87.2)

The table above shows that a majority of the students (87.2%) was in agreement with the use of mobile to help improve their English language proficiency. As English is widely used in all mobile learning applications, it provided ample opportunities for the students to learn the language. These findings were supported by two of the respondents, who said:

The use of mobile learning helps me to improve my English. This is because I can download many types of learning applications to improve my English.

(Respondent 24)

Mobile learning can help me to search for writing materials for MUET. In my opinion, I can install Webster dictionary to help me translate or know the meaning some of the unfamiliar words to improve my English language. For that reason, it can make me good in learning writing for MUET.

(Respondent 88)

The students (85.3%) also held strong belief that the use of mobile learning creates

an enjoyable learning environment for writing activities in the classroom. This finding coincides with Zhang’s (2015) study which reported that many good applications were designed for mobile devices to promote fun learning. Additionally, 80.9% of the students was also in favour of applying mobile learning to help them increase their interest in writing. This finding supports Hlodan’s (2010) view on the role of mobile devices as an interactive multimedia tool to engage students in the teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, only 77.7% of the students agreed and strongly agreed that the use of mobile learning contributes to the development of their MUET writing. One of the respondents commented:

Sometimes, it’s difficult to draft my writing using mobile device because the screen is smaller than the computer’s screen. Besides, I don’t feel comfortable reading academic journals or long information using mobile because it’s hard to read it.

(Respondent 117)

It can be said that the range of 77.7% to 87.2% obviously showed that the students perceived that mobile learning can be fully utilised as an effective learning tool in MUET for writing skills. Its ability to help in improving students' English language proficiency can be described as nothing short of excellent.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study are not only beneficial to pre-university students in secondary schools, but also to other students in teacher training institutes, colleges, universities, polytechnics or any other educational institutes. The study is a booster to the implementation of the current twenty-first century learning strategies in the English language classroom. Traditional teaching methods such as the "chalk and talk" no longer conforms to the needs of the today's students. Learning writing skills through the use of mobile for instance, encourages the students to be interactively engaged in their learning task.

Other than that, the study also serves as the touchstone of the learner-centred approach for the MUET writing class. Since students these days are IT-savvy, they only need to be taught how to explore their own learning. The teachers only play the role of facilitators. Changing the teaching method once in a while allows teachers to have more time to explore new teaching materials. Furthermore, mobile learning is proven to be less time consuming. Consequently, both teachers and students would benefit from its implementation. Teachers will have ample

time to prepare an enjoyable and interactive lesson. Students too, will be motivated to learn.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study match the results of many previous studies on the use of mobile learning. The findings on students' perceptions on the use of mobile learning, with regard to its relevance and having knowledge of mobile learning match the findings of the study conducted by Valk et al. (2010). It also meets the needs of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2013). The findings on the utilisation of mobile learning tallied with the expert's opinion like Hlodan (2010) and the studies done by Zhang (2015).

Overall, the study managed to gain positive responses among the students regarding the use of mobile learning to master writing skills for the MUET. The data from the survey and open-ended questions revealed that the students had good knowledge on the use of mobile for learning. It is thus proven there is a significant relevance in using mobile learning for mastering writing skills. This indeed supports Zaki and Md Yunus's (2015) views on the high potentiality of applying mobile learning to teach writing skills. It is apparent too that the utilisation of mobile learning could enhance students' English language proficiency. Consequently, this can be an excellent medium for cultivating students' interest to learn the English language.

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