The Use of Tell Me More (TMM) in Learning Vocabulary Among ESL Students

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Abstract

This study examines the use of Tell Me More (TMM) software among tertiary students in Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP). The research questions addressed in the study are as follows: (1) Is there any significant difference in the number of words learnt between the Pre-test and the Delayed Recall post-test using TMM among students? (2) How are the students' learning attitudes after TMM is used in learning vocabulary? (3) Why do students prefer using TMM in learning vocabulary?, and (4) Why do students find difficult using TMM in learning vocabulary? The seven-week study involved 43 subjects attending two vocabulary lessons. Interviews and survey are also administered in the study. Results shows that there is 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 in using TMM to learn vocabulary. In relation to learning attitudes, the descriptive analysis demonstrates that students claim that they have good opportunity using TMM, yet their perceptions of learning vocabulary remain the same as before they used the software. Qualitative findings reveal that students prefer the drag-and-drop feature in TMM. However, their experiences also show the difficulties of using the software such as imitating the native-speaker in pronouncing words, absent of flexible access and unavailability of hypertext for meaning of target words. These findings provide empirical data for the use of computers in learning vocabulary, yet, their benefits depend on the individual learners.

Introduction

The use of computer is not new in language learning. In fact, in language teaching, teachers have been using these tools ever since the 1960's (Lee, 2000; Terego, 2009; Jimin, 2007). Until then, the explosion of interest in using computers for language teaching and learning has never stopped (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). Moreover, the various language learning software available in the market such as Rosetta Stone, TMM, DynEd and English4Today are able to develop the English language skills necessary for success in students' academic life. From the software listed, TMM that is available in UMP, is used to identify its usefulness in learning vocabulary. Specifically, it tries to determine (1) Is there any significant difference in the number of words learnt between the Pre-test and the Delayed Recall post-test using TMM among students? (2) How are the students' learning attitudes after TMM is used in learning vocabulary? (3) Why do students prefer in using TMM in learning vocabulary?, and (4) Why do students find difficult in using TMM in learning vocabulary?

The Role of Computer in Teaching and Learning Language

The uses of computers are common in our daily lives. They can be considered as part of our life for their uses in learning or entertaining. Instructions are given to computers to perform actions that are required by human. In her review of the uses of computers in the language classroom, Gündüz (2005) reasoned that computers are "the servant of the users, and thus, should not be forgotten that their roles in teaching is solely a teaching aid" (p. 197). This means computers have no inborn wisdom, and can perform a task only through the instructions given by a human user.

Burston (1993) asserts that computers have become a technology that is used for teaching and learning in language classes since they were used to aid in presentation, justification and assessment of materials to be learnt. His view is supported by Lai (2006) who maintains that students' assessment can be evaluated more easily with the use of computer technology. Computers can be used to capture, analyse, and present data on L2 students' performances during the learning process. Computers therefore, enable the process of monitoring students' learning progress more effectively.

From being the providers in the traditional classroom, teachers have become facilitators through the use of computers. Such a learning environment emphasises student centeredness (Wong, Hanafi Atan & Shahril Sabudin, 2010). This suggests that the dissemination of information no longer relies on the teachers alone. Students, on the other hand, are no more the receivers of knowledge. Instead, they share knowledge and expertise with their teachers. Teachers as facilitators, take a leading role in modelling linguistic practices, and in providing instructions, corrections and guidance towards achieving learning goals (O'Dwyer, 2006). Students become more self-directed fostered by shared decision making in the language classroom. Undeniably, the use and integration of computer technology in classes have brought changes to the teachers' and the students' responsibilities (Wong, Hanafi Atan & Shahril Sabudin, 2010).

Computer and Its Benefit for Vocabulary Learning

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the use of computer pertaining to its benefit on students in learning vocabulary. The uses of the software; Low-First Method Vocabulary Builder motivates students in learning vocabulary compared to students who were in the List and Card groups (Nakata, 2008). Yet, motivation depends on the support of the teachers. Chia (2000) reports that the self access nature and the activities in the CALL programme was not able to motivate the secondary school students in learning by themselves. Instead, those in the traditional learning method in which teachers were present in class made them learnt better as students could address their needs throughout the whole learning process.

Computers can teach students to be independent. Kiliçkaya & Krajka's (2010) study demonstrates that the use of the WordChamp allows students to make choices by clicking on the vocabulary they want to know. The invisible links in the programme enabled students to annotate electronic hypertext on their own since the hypertexts provided support for all words in the text. The use of computer enables students' attention to be drawn by integrating pictures into multimedia forms. Iwanski's (2000) study also show that students pay more attention to learning vocabulary when computers were used compared to learning vocabulary using traditional method. The multimedia features ease the learning process, as such was not present when blackboards and overhead projectors were used.

The use of authoring tools such as Netscape, JBC (Hot Potatoes) and Sound Recorder (Windows '98) may enhance students' vocabulary learning (Kuen, 2000). Likewise, the Vocabulary Knowledge in Guy's (2006) study enhances students vocabulary learning since the software allow them to capture definitions using research based graphic organisers as well enables them to record and delete the words they learnt.

Students' retention in learning vocabulary may be achieved by using computers. De Ridder's (2002) study revealed that hyperlinks attracted students' attention to the words they learned, and thus, helped them to retain the words. In fact, computers can assist students to memorise the words for longer period of time (Yip & Kwan, 2006). Yet, this was only observable when verification of meaning through the first language was provided (Grace, 1998). Obviously, computers are significant in language learning due to the advantages they offer for teachers and students.

An Overview of TMM

TMM is an application software comprises of Cultural, Written, Vocabulary, Grammar, Oral and Lesson Workshops for learning English. However, only the Cultural Workshop was used for the study to depict its purpose of learning vocabulary. Three 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 analyse 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 organise 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 personalise their own learning. In the 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.

The Use of TMM in Past Studies

Cristophe (2001) reports the use on the significance of TMM online technology for web-based language training in terms of its pedagogical content, learning support and available tutoring services. These new

features are introduced for online use of TMM in addition to the available modes that are software and CDROMs. The advantage of speech recognition in the software is one of the main areas of studies conducted in the use of TMM. Hincks (2005) reports that TMM enabled students to receive evaluative feedback for pronunciation aids, and hence, able to met their needs at progressing levels and in different speaking situations. Earlier on, Hincks (2003) found that practice using the software was beneficial to those students who began the course with a strong foreign accent but was of limited value for students who began the course with better pronunciation. Locally, TMM was evaluated by 70 undergraduates in helping them to enhance their English speaking skill (Masdinah Alauyah Md. Yusof & Isni Mimiyana Mohamad Borhan, 2010). The students' views was shared by teachers as the later claimed that it can improve students' proficiency especially in pronunciation and reading (Melor Md. Yunus, Harwati Hashim, Kamaruzaman Jusoff, Norazah Mohd Nordin, Ruhizan M Yasin & Saemah Rahman, 2010). In summary, past studies conducted using TMM focused on reviewing its online usage and speech recognition for pronunciation and reading. To date, though, there is no empirical data collected in the use of TMM for vocabulary learning. The present study, therefore, was to add to the body of literature by contributing to investigate the use of Vocabulary Workshop in learning vocabulary.

Method

Participants

43 students were selected as the sample for the study after data normality was conducted. They were the first semester and first year students studying in UMP. Consent forms ensuring the confidentiality of the research data were distributed to the students prior to the study. The scores of the pre-test were used to determine the group homogeneity. The frequency curve in Figure 1 (Appendix) displays scores that appear to be reasonably and normally distributed. The histogram of the data showed a bell shape, akin to the nature of a normal distribution. Hence, this entailed that they were homogenous based on the pre-test.

The Procedure of the Study

In the study, students took the pre-test in the first week. In the second and third week, vocabulary lessons was administered to them. Each 21 words were taught in a week. A two-week gap of no vocabulary lessons and tests was scheduled in week four and five. In week six, they took the Delayed Recall post-test. Also, questionnaire on students' learning attitude was distributed in the week. In week seven, four students were called for interview to obtain in depth analysis of the preferences and difficulties using TMM.

Vocabulary Selection

In considering the inclusion of target vocabulary, Read (2000) argues that there is no standard approach to the selection of target vocabulary for testing, yet, they may be selected from class texts or activities (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Most importantly, ensuring various parts of speech should be a priority (Folse, 2006) that can be achieved by conducting need analysis (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). Moreover, the number of target words should depend on the goal of the class, and 20 words per week should be sufficient for vocabulary enrichment (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Since effective vocabulary teaching depends on the students, the nature of the words, instructional purpose and strategies of learning vocabulary (Flanigan & Greenwood, 2007), the sufficiency for instructions therefore, cannot be measured with the classroom time spent (Twaddel, 1973). Rather, vocabulary learning is an ongoing process especially in teaching the low context vocabulary (Mehring, 2005). The following procedures were followed in selecting the target vocabulary.

a) Analysis of target vocabulary was done by examining the words contained in 48 slides of the Fill-in-the-Blanks exercise in the Vocabulary Workshop.
b) Fifty-two target words were preselected.
c) Four highly proficient students were appointed to make sentences using the target words.
d) Sentences written by them were checked by three teachers as examiners. They were only able to make sentences of 10 target words.
e) Forty-two words that are characterised by nouns, verbs and adjectives were determined as the target words for the study (Appendix: Table 1).
f) The selected words were confirmed by the English lecturers and teachers to enrich students' vocabulary.

The Use of TMM in the Study

Students were assigned to assess the Vocabulary Workshop in TMM. They were required to do a Fill-in-the-blanks activity in the workshop. Also, they were instructed to use the hyperlinks in the programme. The hyperlink that is "Find out more about a word" consists of two other hyperlinks that are 'Pronounce the word' and 'Listen to the word'. "Conjugation" is another hyperlink that explains the modification of a verb from its basic form. Clicking this hyperlink connects them to other screens that are "Modes and tenses" and "Conjugation tool". Finally, the hyperlink for "Grammar explanation" can be clicked for further grammatical aspects of the words. They may know words in their passive and active forms, plural and singular, verbs, nouns, adjective, and auxiliary verbs. Yet, only some sentences are provided with this hyperlink while others are not. The drill and practise task enabled students to redo the items in the activity if they were not satisfied with their answers.

The Design of the Tests

The study uses two vocabulary tests that are the pre-test and delayed recall post-test. The tests involved two formats that are multiple choices and fill-in-the-blanks. The former measures passive vocabulary knowledge, while the latter measures active vocabulary knowledge (Waring, 1998). Fill-in-the-blanks are employed to help students in the engagement of deep processing and efficient in terms of student and teacher time required (Folse, 2004), while multiple choices are amenable to analysis (O'Dwyer, 2010). Distractors or fillers in vocabulary assessments are added to minimize reliance on guessing (Folse, 2006). Hence, three distractors are in the multiple choices whereas one to three distractors are in the fill-in-the-blanks. They are initiated to reduce the chance of getting the answers correct by simply filling in words for the questions asked (Mui, 2004). Both tests consist of four sections. Equivalent form of test is used in the delayed recall post-test to prevent students from remembering the subject matter being tested from the pre-test (Ary, Razavieh & Jacobs, 2003). Besides that, a pilot test was conducted to a group of ESL students assumed to have similar language proficiency to the participants in the main study. This is to determine the validity and reliabilty of the instruments. The reliability of both tests are (KR20) 0.77. All the instruments was validited by vocabulary experts in and outside the university. Changes were made following their comments. The time allocated for the test was 20 minutes. The test was administered during a class time.

Results

A *t* test was used to identify whether or not there were significant difference in the number of words learned between the pre-test and the delayed recall post-test using TMM among students. On average, the *t* test results shown in Table 2 indicated 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. The calculated eta squared with 0.44 produced a large effect size (Cohen, 1998).

Table 2: Result of the Paired-Sample *t* Test before and after using TMM

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	p
Pre-test	43	13.46	4.460	-5.707	42	.000
Delayed Recall Post-test	43	18.27	4.461			

The descriptive analysis is used to explain the summary measures of 14 items in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed after students sat for their delayed recall post-test. Table 3 shows that item 7 concerning the opportunity to learn vocabulary using TMM obtained the highest mean (M = 4.28, SD = 0.67). This indicated that the student favoured learning vocabulary using TMM. Meanwhile, item 9 relating to their awareness of using computer in learning vocabulary had the lowest mean (M = 3.49, SD = 0.70). This entailled that students' perceptions in learning vocabulary were not changed although they had the opportunity using TMM.

Table 3: Evaluation of Learning Attitude in using TMM

Nos.	Items	M	SD
1.	I could enrich my vocabulary knowledge using the method	4.09	0.75
2.	I could increase my skills in learning vocabulary using the method	4.02	0.71
3.	I could improve my vocabulary using the method	4.05	0.75

4.	I could follow or keep up with the learning of vocabulary using the method	4.00	0.65
5.	I could make the best use of the method in learning vocabulary	3.95	0.58
6.	I could increase my knowledge about the words I learned using the method	4.02	0.77
7.	I had a good opportunity to learn vocabulary using the method	4.28	0.67
8.	I was motivated to use dictionary in learning vocabulary after I was introduced to it	4.02	0. 67
9.	I noticed that my understanding of learning vocabulary have changed after being exposed to the method	3.49	0.70
10.	I could memorise the meaning of words I learned easily using the method	3.58	0.66
11.	I could recall the meaning of words I learned easily using the method	3.51	0.83
12.	I enjoyed learning vocabulary using the method	4.16	0.75
13.	I found that it is interesting to use the method in learning vocabulary	4.14	0.64
14.	I found that the method was suitable for my kind of vocabulary learning	4.00	0.58

To identify the preferences and difficulty in using TMM, all interview protocols were initially transcribed verbatimly. In reporting the interviews, pseudonyms were used to protect students' identities. Two excellent students (known as Jenny and Andrew) were employed to identify their preferences of using TMM. In relation to the preferences of using TMM, the students claimed that the drag-and-drop feature is 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".

Similar procedure was performed by Andrew. He perceived that the drag-and-drop feature eased his work in finding the right answers. He remarked:

> 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.

Another two students who obtained low scores (known as Misa and Ain) were called to identify the difficulty they encountered using TMM. They found that the use of a fair amount of British-English models in TMM was difficult as they were required 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 programme. Misa expressed her frustration:

> 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.

The absence of flexible access in using TMM that could only be accessed in the Multimedia Language Labs caused difficulty for them. It could only be used with the presence of the teachers as the labs' doors could only be accessed by authorised personnel. Such conditions, deny 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"

The poor students also claimed that hypertext for target words were essential as they perceived that it could assist them in knowing the meaning of the 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 [items in Fill-in-the-blanks activity] since the programme does not provide meaning [for words] or dictionary"

Ain added that providing meaning would ease her understanding of the words she did not understand. She commented:

> "If there is meaning [to the target words] it would be much easier... Just provide a hyperlink for meaning for [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".

Discussion

This study examined the use of TMM in learning vocabulary among ESL undergraduates in UMP. The findings from this study make several contributions to the current literature in using TMM for vocabulary learning. They show that (a) students made progress in learning vocabulary after they were introduced to TMM; (b) students had good opportunity learning vocabulary using TMM although their perceptions were much the same before they used the software; (c) students preferred the drag-and-drop feature as it can ease navigation; (d) students found it difficult using TMM due to the use of British ascent, its limited access and the absence of hypertext for meaning of target words. The finding of the study concerning the use of vocabulary learning software is consistent with Kiliçkaya and Krajka (2010). The results of the post-test in their study showed that students who used WordChamp performed significantly better than the participants in the control group who practiced vocabulary in the traditional way. However, the finding stood in contrast with that of Chia's (2000). Students in her study who used computers were not able to memorise the words they learned after a 40-day treatment was conducted. Instead, those who received the conventional method remembered words better for long term.

It seemed that the drag-and-drop feature offered by the software outweighted its difficulties, and hence, students' perceptions of learning vocabulary using TMM was consistent with before they used the programme. The interactive feature that enables them to drag their answer and drop it to a blank space appears to be insufficent to facilitate their learning of vocabulary. Although the knowledge of a word includes knowing its pronunciation (Nation, 1990), the use of native speakers' accent in teaching the students to pronounce the words as in using TMM creates a problem to the students in the present study. The findings is consistent with Masdinah Alauyah Md. Yusof and Isni Mimiyana Mohamad Borhan (2008). The students in their study who use TMM for self-access commented that pronouncing words in British accent has been a problem since in Malaysia they are exposed to American accent in various medium of entertainments, and hence, they are more familiar with it. The teachers who were interviewed in Melor Md. Yunus *et.al's* (2010) study also commented that the use of British accent in TMM is not suitable as some of the pronunciations are different from Malaysian English. Since the hypertext for meaning is not present, this factor has also made their perceptions of learning vocabulary unchanged. The convenience of hypertext in understanding the meanings of words corroborated the research conducted by Koren (1999). Hypertext enabled the first year university students in her study to infer the meanings of target words. Interestingly, the use of hypertext in Haseltine's (2006) study are 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. Moreover, the use of a server to connect TMM to other computers in the language lab limits its use in some other locations. Findings from Liu's (1998) study reported that the tertiary students commented that they should be given more time to work on their own computers instead of having all students to use them in the class hours. Although they agreed that working with computers is flexible, it is a waste of valuable class time in the lab.

In conclusion, this study has attempted to investigate the use of TMM in vocabulary learning. It shows that the software was able to to assist students in enriching their vocabulary although there was difficulty in using

it. The study only accessed Fill-in-the-blanks activity in the Vocabulary Workshop. Hence, further research may need to explore other vocabulary activities such as picture/word association, words and topics, and word search in the Vocabulary Workshop to build students' vocabulary. Last but not least, using language learning software is a great way to increase students' vocabulary, and practice identifying and using new words. However, not every programme is suitable to all students.

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