Learning English Language with Technology: Case Study of a Primary School in Kota Belud, Sabah

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English Language in rural primary schools using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has often been seen as a challenge for language teachers. In an attempt to better understand the difficulties faced, a yearlong study was conducted to investigate how 40 voluntary student teachers of a public university in Sabah use ICT and the multisensory approach to teach English. The study employs The Learner Centric Ecology of Resources Framework (Luckin) as a guide to observe knowledge scaffolding of students learning. Focus group interviews were employed to elicit qualitative data with some selected student teachers who participated in the selected primary schools in Kota Belud, Sabah. The results show that the majority of the student teachers were motivated to teach English using the multisensory approach because it helped them to connect English with the outside world via visual aids (multimedia). The student teachers' reflective journals also indicated that they were able to align the ICT materials with the proficiency levels of the students, create interactive teaching and learning materials, and use ICT to improve class control. All the actions taken by the student teachers prove that they are frequently updating each other in teaching akin to the Luckin framework. If this method of learning is practised by more schools, it would make language learning more interesting.

Keywords: language learning, learner centric ecology of resources, scaffolding, multisensory, technology

INTRODUCTION

The use of ICT in Malaysian schools dates back to the 1970s. Since then, both government and non-government agencies have implemented numerous ICT-related initiatives. However, standing at 33%, Sabah remains the state with the lowest rate of Internet penetration (Borneo Post, 2011, December 18). The *Teaching For Change Using ICT*

project was initiated by a group of educators in Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The project commenced on October 2012. The project aimed to improve learning through an ICT-based multisensory approach. The project involved three subjects: English, Science and Mathematics. This paper focuses on the English language teaching and learning of the student teachers.

The specific objectives for the English component of the project are:

  • to extend pupils' phonic knowledge
  • to introduce the rudiments of grammar
  • to teach spelling systematically
  • to improve vocabulary and comprehension

Lessons planned and conducted in this project were aligned with the Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR). Six modules and six compilations of lesson plans were prepared and handed to the school. Each of the students also received a module and a stationery kit. The modules contained notes, exercises and games for English learning. The funder, Yayasan Sejahtera Malaysia sponsored two LCDs, four laptops and four amplifiers for the school.

The project was participated by 40 student teachers who were pursuing their Bachelor of Education (TESL). Prior to this project, the students did not have any experience teaching in a public school. A series of training sessions involving the ICT-based multisensory approach was conducted with the student teachers. The training involved these areas: introduction to phonics, letter sounds, blends, songs and actions, the use of different teaching aids, games, grammar, readers, lesson-planning and microteaching.

A diagnostic test was conducted on November 2012. The teaching and learning activities commenced on January 2012. The English student teachers visited the school once every three weeks. Every class was assigned two student teachers. The first phase of the project is completed.

THE PROJECT SITE

The project was conducted at a primary school named Sekolah Kebangsaan Suang Punggor in Kota Belud. The school is located about 70 kilometres from the state capital, Kota Kinabalu. The school is located in a rural village, Kampung Suang Punggor. This school has a population of 207 students, and over 30 teaching staff. The majority of the population in the school belongs to the Bajau ethnic group. The main occupations in this village are fishermen and farmers. The enrolment of the school is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Number of students in SK Suang Punggor

Class	Enrolment
Year 1	35
Year 2	39
Year 3	35
Year 4	32
Year 5	32
Year 6	34
Total	**207**

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study employs the learner centric ecology of resources (Luckin, 2008). The learner centric ecology of resources consists of four major elements; skills and knowledge, curriculum, resources and administration. Luckin (*ibid*) defines skills and knowledge as the substance learned, while resources refer to tools or people to learn the skills and knowledge. This paper only focuses on skills and knowledge, and resources. In this study, skills and knowledge are defined as the ICT skills and knowledge of the student teachers. This study sought to explore beyond the student teachers' ability to use ICT tools. Skills and knowledge also refer to the student teachers' ability to digitize the language learning process. Resources refer to the ICT hardware and software needed to develop learning materials and to implement the teaching and learning process. ICT resources used by the student teachers included video-sharing sites, photo-sharing sites, audio-sharing sites and presentation tools.

Studies (Hadi Salehi & Zeinab Salehi 2012, Saadiyah Darus & Ho Wai Lin, 2008) show that using ICT the right way in learning and teaching is also a crucial factor for successful ICT integration in language learning. Existing literature reviews on teachers' ICT competency mostly focus on ICT literacy (Narasuman, Md. Rizal & Azlan, 2011; Lau & Sim, 2008, Samuel & Zaitun, 2007). Although little is known about how teachers use ICT to transform English language learning activities, Samuel and Zaitun (2007) reported that English teachers lacked the ability to use ICT for language learning. In addressing this issue, this project attempted to integrate ICT into multisensory approach to improve language learning.

Multisensory approach in language learning involves the use of senses to learn English. Multisensory learning suggests that students learn through visual learning, audio learning, tactile learning and kinesthetic learning. Some of the learning activities included in this project were singing songs, playing games, playing salt dough, air writing, learning through flash cards, playing hopscotch and watching videos.

DATA COLLECTION

This paper focuses on the qualitative data collected from the student teachers and the students. The study employed reflective journal writing and observation as the main methods of enquiry. A total of seven student teachers submitted their reflective journals for data analysis. Observations from time to time were also conducted to collect evidence in the forms of photos and videos. Documents such as students' work were also collected. The data sought to answer two research questions:

(a) What are the ICT skills and knowledge demonstrated by the student teachers?

(b) How was the ICT-based multisensory approach used in language learning?

The data obtained were analysed through coding and grouping to find emerging themes. Findings obtained through reflective journal were triangulated with observation and document analysis.

FINDINGS

ICT Skills and Knowledge Learned

Firstly, student teachers demonstrated the ability to align the ICT materials with the proficiency levels of the students. The materials also needed to be relevant to the rural context of the school. ICT materials for language learning available on the Internet do not usually fit the local context. As Student Teacher 7 recalls "we searched for teaching ideas using ICT online and modified them in order to fit them into our lesson plans". Therefore, student teachers had to ensure that the materials used were appropriate for the local context.

> When we planned for the lesson, we took into account the students' background, the syllabus for the lesson…We tried not to dwell too much on what we thought would be best or bad for the students in the rural area because we didn't want to end up creating materials that were completely foreign to them and thus hindered their learning process.
>
> *Student Teacher 2*

Secondly, student teachers learned the skills and knowledge to create interactive teaching and learning materials. Interactive activities avoid dull and monotonous lessons. Interactivity helped the student teachers to manage the flow and pace of the lessons as they could "easily pause, play or rewind the videos or slide show" (Student Teacher 3). By creating interactive materials, students became actively engaged. As Student Teacher

1 recalls, "the use of songs also encouraged them to participate actively during the lesson as they could sing along to the songs."

> We searched for materials that would suit the students' interest and needs. When we taught the topic of Sounds Around Us, we used popular nursery rhymes to make the students more engaged in the classroom. We also inserted some pictures to help them understand the topic more.
>
> *Student Teacher 2*

Thirdly, student teachers learned about class management in ICT-based language lessons. Class management was challenging especially for classes with a large number of students. Student Teachers 2, 3 and 6 expressed that using ICT helped them to control the students easier as the graphics and sounds attracted their attention. However, Student Teacher 1 faced problem controlling her class as the students became disorganised when participating in the ICT-based activities.

> The number of students was quite big and the students at the back were not able to see the video clearly. We asked them to come forward. The students then started to push each other as every one of them wanted to go near the computer and speaker. It took time to control them because they became too 'active' when they saw the computer and LCD. The problem was not because of the technology used but more to the students.
>
> *Student Teacher 1*

ICT-based Multisensory Language Learning

The use of ICT in the multisensory approach helps to improve the delivery of abstract knowledge, especially to young learners. ICT helped especially in the explanation stage of new knowledge. Due to the rural setting of the school, Student Teacher 1 expressed that it was challenging for the students to "imagine things they have not seen or things that they are not exposed to." ICT enabled student teachers to provide concrete examples to teach them knowledge which they had not known before.

> I feel better in using ICT in the classroom because with all the colours and clearer wordings, it complements my teaching as well as delivers a clearer message to the students, especially the animation, which helps in giving them exercises and they will be able to remember it better.
>
> *Student Teacher 7*

The use of ICT in the multisensory approach also allowed the student teachers to bring the outside world to the classroom. ICT allowed students to experience new things which could not be "obtained through reading a book" (Student Teacher 1). As Student Teacher 4 recalls ICT could "give them some insight of how the outside world can be" (Student Teacher 4).

The use of ICT in the multisensory approach helps to establish language practice opportunities. In introducing new vocabulary and explaining new knowledge, student teachers did not have to resort to translation. Instead, student teachers could rely on the ICT tools to present the meaning of the new vocabulary and knowledge through pictures and videos.

> For Primary 1, we used ICT to teach them vocabulary related to animals by showing them video and pictures of animals instead of just using translation in the classroom. This helped in controlling the use of mother-tongue in the classroom.
>
> *Student Teacher 4*

Students are able to relate to the new knowledge learned through ICT and sensory-based activities. Students are able to make the connection between the new English vocabulary and the ICT-based audio-visual aids. In studying "Animal Sounds" students listened to the student teacher's explanation, saw the picture and listened to the actual sounds. The students were able to remember and recall the new knowledge when doing the activity.

> The pictures, videos and sounds produced from the ICT materials attracted the students and enhanced their understanding. This was because, they were not only hearing the teacher's explanation but they could also refer to the pictures provided. They could easily visualise the idea. The sounds also enhanced their understanding and made them more alert during the lessons. For example, when we taught them 'Sounds Around Us', we needed to introduce to them the sounds of animals. Using ICT made it easier for us to explain the sound as they could see the pictures and hear the animal sounds.
>
> *Student Teacher 3*

Making a connection through visualisation helped the students to retain the information and apply the knowledge in their activity. As Student Teacher 7 recalls:

They tend to remember better when they see and listen. What I do to make sure if they are still able to recall and apply what they have learned from the previous lesson is to give them some questions or ask them to be the teacher and recap what I have taught them earlier.

Student Teacher 7

CONCLUSION

Student teachers demonstrated and learned ICT-related skills and knowledge previously unknown to them. In teacher education programmes, student teachers are taught to devise ICT-based learning materials. However, they have limited opportunities to experience teaching using ICT-based materials in real classrooms. Participation in community projects enables student teachers to develop pedagogical, technological and content knowledge using the resources available in the community.

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