A Symbiotic UTM-UNMC Collaboration: Supporting Postgraduates of Bangladeshi College Education Development Project (BCEDP) with English Language Proficiency through MyLinE

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Abstract. English language proficiency is a prerequisite for students pursuing education at postgraduate level. This is especially so in settings where they are undergoing training to become educators and upon graduation are required to use the language as the medium of instruction in their teaching profession. Nonetheless, it would seem that some students have not acquired the proficiency level needed. This could be an issue as the curriculum of postgraduate education often excludes English proficiency courses, thus depriving students of opportunities to improve their proficiency. To address this, some educational institutions offer English language intervention programmes both face-to-face and online to help the students learn and practise the language. In the context of this study, this intervention is made possible through a collaboration between University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC) as the host university and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) as the service provider. This collaboration aims at supporting a group of postgraduate students learning at a distance to improve their English language skills to meet the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Band as set by UNMC. In particular, 100 UNMC postgraduate students who are the master trainers of Bangladeshi College Education Development Project (BCEDP) undergo a blended learning program. The program requires students to participate in online learning activities through the national portal, Online Resources for Learning in English (MyLinE), and face-to-face instruction facilitated by the UTM MyLinE Task Force. This paper provides a comprehensive view of blended learning approach in facilitating English language learning at postgraduate level.

Keywords: MyLinE, blended learning, English language proficiency, MUET, distance learning, postgraduate students

1 Introduction

Globalization had necessitated everyone to be proficient in English, a language that is a vehicle to put forward thoughts (Vency & Ramganesh, 2013). Being proficient in English is a ticket to live a better life, study well, live abroad and experience new culture, and be involved in business relationship globally. The language has become the second language of people in many parts of the world and being educated means being able to use the language. Therefore it is undeniable English language plays a big role in the progress of globalization.

Globalisation has impacted Bangladesh in many ways including its education, economy, communication and technology sectors. Bangladesh is an example of a country that has done extremely well to be able to graduate from low-income country to lower-middle-income country status in 2015 (World Bank, 2016). The rate of globalization in the country is going strong and improving skills and productivity are crucial to Bangladesh’s quest to accelerate economic growth. This would require improving the quality and relevance of tertiary education so that education institutions are equipped to produce graduates with more market relevant skills, including having an excellent English language proficiency. The Government of Bangladesh identified that upgrading the quality of tertiary education institutions to international standards is a prerequisite for attaining its vision of becoming a middle-income country by 2021.

The internalisation of tertiary education institutions may lead to an increasing use of a foreign language - for example English - as the medium of instruction. Educators must be ready to use English as a medium of instruction.
Bangladeshi College Education Development Project (BCEDP) is an example of such programme that works on improving the use of English for teaching purposes among college educators across Bangladesh. The implementing agency and international academic partner for this project is University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC). UNMC entered into this agreement to support the transformation of the Bangladesh Higher Education College Sector.

2 English Language Proficiency in Postgraduate Education

Vency and Ramganesh (2013) highlights the need for in depth revision in making sure postgraduate students are equipped with the English proficiency skills so that they can function effectively in the English language dominant world.

Vinke and Jochems (1993) emphasised that a better command of English among postgraduates increases the chance of being academically successful. In this study, language proficiency was measured by TOEFL and academic success was defined as the average score on seven written examinations. There is a range of TOEFL scores (450 is the cut-off scores) within which a better command of English increases the chance of being academically successful.

In a study conducted by Woodrow (2006), English skills as measured by a proficiency test, IELTS, is moderately predictive of academic achievement in the first semester of study. The analysis indicated that at a lower level of English, the relationship is stronger than at a higher level. For students scoring 6.5 or lower, proficiency may influence their achievement, whereas with students scoring 7 and above, English proficiency does not influence academic performance. This finding is in line with what Vinke and Jochems (1993) found. Woodrow (2006) in the study interviewed the instructors too. According to the study, some instructors claimed students could fail assignments if their English was not deemed proficient enough.

The findings highlighted above proved that language proficiency contributes to academic success as it mentioned as well by Krashen and Brown (2007). They believe that "those who read more do better on all aspects of academic language. They have larger vocabularies, spell better, read better, have a more acceptable writing style, and are more adept at handling complex grammatical constructions".

3 Blended Language Learning (BLL)

Blended learning can be defined as an approach combining different learning systems – combination of different delivery media, instructional methods, or online and face-to-face instruction. The ratio of the blend could vary depending on appropriateness (Graham, 2006).

BLL can be defined here as a structured blend of online and face-to-face language learning, combining the any time/pace/place advantages of online materials with the motivational effects of group learning and teacher support (Lamping, 2004).

Koehler and Mishra (2009) introduced a framework underpinning blended learning. They suggest that there are three main components of teachers’ knowledge – content, pedagogy, and technology. According to them, these components should ideally interact so that students’ capacity is fully engaged. An example of such interaction is illustrated in Fig. 1.
Rejection of learners is a matter that is mostly discussed as well when it comes to BLL. Stracke (2007) analysed the reasons why students dropped out of a blended course. Some of the reasons cited are lack of continuity face-to-face and computer-assisted components, a perceived lack of usage of the paper medium, and the rejection of the computer as a medium of language learning.

5 The Experience

In this collaboration between UNMC and UTM, the aim is to support a group of students to improve their English language skills to meet the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) band. This experience involves 36 hours of face-to-face instruction conducted over three weekends with 100 postgraduates cum educators who are currently pursuing their postgraduate education to become Master Trainers as part of BCEDP.

The teaching method includes face-to-face teaching which focuses on the four English language skills, namely, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills as tested in MUET. Other than that, it also includes hands-on training to familiarise students with navigating an online portal, MyLinE (myline.utm.my) for when they are back in Bangladesh, specifically the use of resources on MUET MyLinE microsites and monthly online activities on a microsite (ELSP@Nottingham(UNMC) dedicated for these students. To date, the students have participated in online activities for eleven months. This distance learning provides opportunities for the students to continue learning and improving their English language competency while continuing their day-to-day job responsibilities back in Bangladesh.

Moreover, the presence of English language instructors in the online forums in the dedicated microsite supports the development and learning as a community. Instructors and students are regularly interacting through the online forums to build rapport and at the same time to develop students’ ideas on a given topic. In addition, social media, specifically Facebook, is also used to keep students engaged, motivated and well-informed on new online tasks.

To monitor their learning progress, a pre-test on Listening and Reading skills and other practice tests are conducted on a monthly basis besides giving language input, tips, strategies and practices from time to time where the emphasis on the English language competency is to ensure quality instruction with English as a medium.

4 Recommendation

Facilitating students to improve their English proficiency through Blended Language Learning is quite a challenging task. However, there a number of recommendations on how to tackle any shortcomings related to this matter.

To begin with, if postgraduate students are enrolling at a university without fulfilling the minimum English proficiency requirements, the university has to consider providing intervention programmes both face-to-face and online to help the students learn and practise the language.
Furthermore, sustaining motivation in the online setting is vital. When not meeting F2F, students have to be more autonomous and self-directed. Instructors must engage the students through multiple strategies in order to boost their motivation.

In addition, students must be provided with a clear goal upon intervention programme enrolment such as taking or re-taking a proficiency test with a specific minimum grade result in order to prove that they are progressing well. All in all, before adopting blended learning, there are a number of considerations:

- Instructors’ role will change from being an explainer to intervener.
- There will be extra workload for the instructors.
- Students must be trained to manage their own learning.

To conclude it, designing a BLL environment is like a kid shopping for a toy. There are various possible designs for the instructors to consider.

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References


