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REVITALIZING ESSAY WRITING IN MALAY LANGUAGE THROUGH MOBILE-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to design a mobile app that can help students learn how to construct an essay according to a specific format. The rationale of building this mobile app was to cater to students' needs in the new normal era where online learning as well as remote classes have become mainstream. This project also sought to tap into the increasing usage of mobile phones in students' daily routines by switching the conventional method of pen and paper to mobile technology. The target population for this research project was an intact class of students at a vocational school in the interior region of Sabah, Malaysia, whose oral proficiency in Malay language was high but lacked the skills in writing a proper essay. The instruments used to collect data were document analysis, exit slips, and rating checklist. The findings of this study might help the researchers gather feedback necessary in designing an effective mobile app that can improve the teaching of essays particularly in Malay language by taking into consideration two learning theories, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and Information and Media Literacy (IML).

The use of the mobile application in writing classes can help accelerate the integration of digital scholarship into school education as students can easily tap into the ubiquity of information and utilize multiple platforms to generate and circulate content. In order to create a mobile app with additional functionality and improved features, more studies are needed to convince stakeholders and tech companies to invest in the development of this app.

Keywords

Malay Language, Essay, Mobile Phone, Mobile Application, Information

1. Introduction

According to the International Society for Technology in Education (2016), students need to be educated to assume their roles as knowledge constructors. In the era where technology has become an integral part of our daily routines, students can use digital tools to search for information, evaluate its credibility and relevance and subsequently create their own informative outputs to communicate their interpretation and understanding of their discoveries. In order to realize students' potential as knowledge constructors, they should be encouraged to explore real-world issues and find solutions or answers related to certain issues.

According to EBSCO (2020), people need to learn to research, evaluate, utilize and convey information effectively in the digital era of information explosion; this type of literacy is known as Information and Media Literacy (IML). This is essential in helping them to decide on the credibility and relevance of a specific type of information by looking at several factors like the audience, the authors, and the construction of the message (UNESCO, 2005). Starkey (2012) and Levnajic (2014) explained how the evolution of the internet from Web 1.0 was static to Web 3.0 where the public began to participate in generating and circulating content necessitated changes on how school education should prepare students to become active participants of society. Schrayemade (2017) argued that these digital and participatory cultures have challenged the conventional notion of knowledge creation and preservation that students might potentially become digital scholars.

With the prevalent usage of mobile technology that accelerates people's reliance on it as their main sources of information, people need to be literate in deciphering, using, and communicating information properly. In the context of classroom learning, students need to effectively use their mobile phones to search for information, critically read the online resources

and use their discoveries in producing their output. This is consistent with the concept of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) which Godwin-Jones (2018) proposed as an approach that is becoming mainstream due to its integral role in our life particularly among students in secondary and tertiary education. MALL is language learning that is enhanced with handheld mobile devices and it is a variation of computer-assisted language learning (Son, 2016).

This research project specifically examined students' ability in using mobile phones to write essays and it was intended to investigate the effectiveness of a self-developed mobile app in assisting them to master this skill. The target language is the national language of Malaysia which is also the mother tongue of the majority of the population, the Malay language.

2. Problem Statement

The students at our school struggled to write proper essays in the Malay language. They lacked the basic skills necessary to write an essay according to the standards that they were expected to meet especially in terms of format, organization, and content. Furthermore, they had limited access to both online and print resources that they could refer to.

As adolescents grew attached to their mobile phones, they were so invested in social media, video games, and casual internet research that distracted them from fully utilizing mobile technology to stay up to date with the latest information and to enhance their learning experience. Consequently, their skills in writing could be categorized as poor due to their lack of background knowledge, limited technical skills in writing as well as the inability to do proper research on the issue they were required to discuss in their essay. Their writing outcomes often failed to deliver elaborate explanations of the chosen topic with supported claims, organized content, and in-depth analysis.

In addition, the students had limited skills in choosing their online resources and evaluating the relevance and credibility of what they found on the internet. They also little understanding of the importance of scholarly work in supporting their arguments. In fact, they barely cited and acknowledged their sources of information in their essays. Their poor practice in research and evaluation skills as well as their lack of understanding of scholarly work might prevent them from becoming effective knowledge constructors who do not just consume information but also contribute to its creation.

3. Objective

The primary objective of this research was to examine the feasibility of this independently created mobile application named “Swipe & Write” (Bijakkarangan in the Malay language) in improving students’ skills in researching, evaluating, and utilizing information to write an essay that meets a set of criteria.

4. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

Bachore (2015) explained the benefits of mobile language learning. The concept can be integrated with formal and informal contexts, it offers authenticity, it fosters learners’ contribution to the creation of the learning content and the practicality of using mobile devices in language activities that involve all four language skills. Godwin-Jones (2011) cautioned mobile phone developers and teachers that there is a tendency for mobile phones to become merely a platform where pen and paper activities are transferred to. Hence, it is essential to ensure that mobile technology needs to be more than just a substitute for papers. Hence, this project intended to design a mobile application that can assist students in improving their writing skills by familiarizing them with techniques on how to gather, assess and use information particularly from the internet so they can produce content that has a high degree of credibility, accuracy, and significance.

5. Information and Media Literacy

As stated by EBSCO (2020), the public needs to be literate in evaluating, using and communicating information so they can distinguish sources of information based on their level of credibility. Scull and Kupersmidt (2011) pointed out that children and adolescents are the most vulnerable group to the influence of media-saturated culture. Despite the necessity of media, the content is sometimes incomplete, inaccurate, and biased (Ulaş, Epçaçan & Koçak, 2012). In addition, there are rising concerns on the possible harmful effects of media that put such vulnerable groups at the risk of violence, sexual and civil crimes and the excessive amount of time that teenagers spend on their mobile phones might cause them to lead sedentary lives fraught with unhealthy practice like drug and alcohol abuse, poor eating habits and smoking (Oxstrand, 2009). This project tapped into students’ frequent usage of mobile phones by designing and testing a mobile application that can guide them in gathering information, evaluating its sources and content, and finally producing informative output in the form of an essay.

6. Digital Scholarship

The digital scholarship encompasses a range of knowledge generation and circulation processes that include the use of digital evidence, methods of inquiry, research, publication, and preservation in fulfilling scholarly and research goals (Rumsey, 2011). Starkey (2011) argued that knowledge is no longer accessed in isolation as learners can access various networks and resources that enable them to interact, collaborate and participate in the development of ideas and this has significantly influenced scholarship. O'Connell (2017) described how technologies like Facebook, Padlet, Twitter, Podio, Instagram, and many other platforms are revolutionizing teaching pedagogies, expanding students' horizon beyond classroom walls, making students more digitally literate, and exploiting new territories for students' informal learning. He reiterated that people in the past referred to the encyclopedia to search for information that they required but people nowadays scroll on Facebook or news website to gather such information. Hence, the public needs to be educated on how to evaluate the reliability of information sources. This justified the research and development of this mobile app that might be able to offer students a proper tool in accessing information and curating it in order to educate others.

7. Remote Learning as the New Norm

Since the COVID 19 pandemic struck the world with devastating effects on education, social life, economy, and health industry, the entire world had to learn to adapt to the dramatic changes needed to contain the spread of the virus. This included the temporary closure of schools that resulted in remote learning. Remote learning might become the primary method of learning or at least a popular alternative to the face-to-face classroom that we used to practice, it is vital for teachers to explore a variety of techniques in reaching out to their students remotely. The most plausible technique is to utilize mobile technology since it is a convenient and almost universally affordable device that most school students have direct access to. In Malaysia, many school students possess mobile phones and it is a great advantage that teachers can use to enhance students' learning experience. Arundel (2019) explained how remote learning prompted major changes in how teachers approach the students. There has been an increased usage of technology in learning through various web tools and devices. There has been a rapid emergence of hands-on and interactive learning activities that teachers applied in their classes. In addition, it helped to

accelerate the flexibility in learning that can take place in both synchronous and asynchronous formats outside school walls.

8. Swipe & Write (Bijak Karangan)

The mobile app was designed to contain several features particularly on how to structure the writing properly and a set of guidelines and criteria on the expected written output. The instructional content of the application assists students in formulating their ideas in a more organized, concise, and argumentative manner. In applying the mobile application in classroom teaching, teachers are required to model several steps in gathering and analyzing information for the content of the essay. These steps were consistent with the principles highlighted by Casa-Todd (2017) in identifying false, misleading, and biased news. There were six steps on how to analyze and evaluate the credibility and relevance of a specific source of information and this is summed up as “SOURCE” which is an acronym for six guiding questions:

- (a) S - How is the source Sponsored?
- (b) O - Does it contain Opinions or Facts?
- (c) U - What is the Underlying Bias? What assumptions are being made?
- (d) R - How Reputable is the source and/or organization?
- (e) C - How Current is the source?
- (f) E - Is the author a known Expert? (i.e., credentials can be verified by various sources)?



Figure 1: *Bijak Karangan* presents the Rules of Thumbs on How to Write a Proper Essay



Figure 2: *Bijak Karangan* contains Caveats in Essay Writing

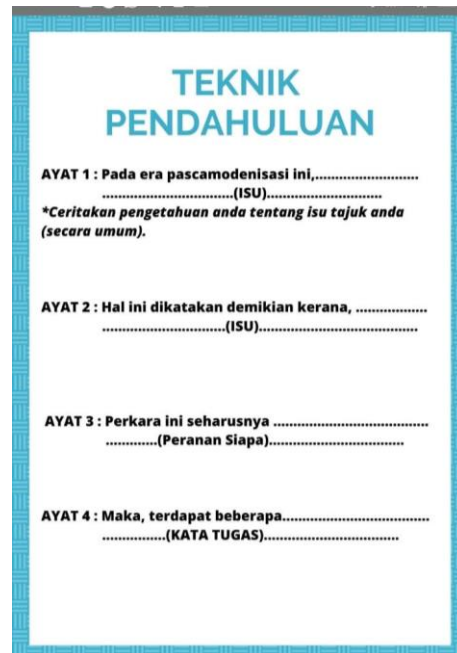


Figure 3: *The application offers Several Templates that can help Students Structure Essays better*

The mobile app generally covers certain fundamental aspects related to essay writing in the Malay language:

1. The specific technical format of a standard essay
2. Tips on how to phrase and organize sentences better.
3. Suggestions on proverbs and idioms that can enhance the meaning of intended messages.
4. Caveats on common mistakes that students do in essay writing.

9. Methodology

The intervention was conducted on an intact group of 16 students aged 17 years old whose writing skills were considered a novice and their past results in the semester examinations were lower than the expected standards for them to be deemed as proficient. This class was one of the vocational certifications programmes that were offered at Keningau Vocational College located in the interior region of Sabah, a Malaysian state. These students spoke many indigenous languages as their mother tongues. The instruments that were used in this study were exit cards, rating checklists, and document analysis. The students' subjective perception of the mobile app was measured through the analysis of their exit cards while the essays that they wrote were assessed

through a rubric containing predetermined criteria (document analysis). The features and feasibility of the mobile application were rated by a panel of Malay language teachers based on a standard checklist on app evaluation.

The exit slip contained three open-ended questions. The first question was on how the application helped them learn to write better and this was followed by a question on was the aspect that they liked most about the mobile app. The final question required the respondents to write their suggestions on how to improve the app. The rating checklist contained six major components in which the panel was expected to either rate the criteria or to write their opinions on few open-ended questions.

10. Findings and Discussion

Based on the exit cards, the respondents stated that the organization of the content of the application was clear, concise, and easily comprehensible particularly on how to structure their writing. The respondents highlighted the tips and techniques on how to enhance the effectiveness of intended messages of their writings as the most beneficial aspect of the application. They also praised the integration of idioms and proverbs into the didactic content that enabled them to understand their usage and use them in their writing. Some of the respondents explained that the proverbs helped to embellish their sentences. One of the suggestions that the respondents proposed was to have a variety of relevant and strong phrases and words that students can integrate into their writing. The design of the mobile application received approval from the students.

The advantages of the application that the students highlighted in their responses indicated the potential usage of mobile technology in learning as posited by Bachore (2015). He explained how mobile devices enable learners to create their content and its interactivity allows them to connect with others and access a lot of information.

The respondents also hinted that using mobile phones helped them search for more information to support their arguments in their essays. Since the mobile phones also contained a specific part on references, it helped them understand what types of online sources were more credible for them to narrow their internet search on. As EBSCO (2020) stated, it is essential to learn how to gather, assess, use and communicate information effectively in the era where information is everywhere and there is too much of it.

The assessment of the mobile application through the rating checklist was summarized by narrowing their responses to specific themes and conclusions. The three panels rated this app three stars out of five. They highlighted the lack of features as the major aspect of the application that could be improved as they proposed few functions such as self-correcting features and hyperlinks. The panels specifically mentioned that the application lacked interactivity which would have enabled users to be more efficient in using it. The three experts seemed to share the consensus that the content of the mobile application was its best feature. They pointed out that the functionality needed the most improvement. They generally proposed for the developer to expand the functions and features of the application so that it is more interactive and has richer content beyond the standard material related to essay writing that is available in textbooks.

11. Conclusion

This mobile application could be developed further with more trials and testing so that it could be properly launched and fully integrated into Malay language lessons either these lessons are conducted face-to-face or remotely. It was evident that the responses from the students and teachers were supportive of the application with few suggestions on how to improve it. In line with the need to adapt to remote learning and technology-assisted lessons, the usage of this mobile app in ensuring effective delivery of lessons is relevant, practical, and significant. In addition, there is a huge potential for further research and innovation to be conducted and developed in the areas of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) as well as information and media literacy (IML) and digital scholarship. However, the features and functions of the mobile app were still at the basic stage that there are more improvements needed on the project which should be followed by more data collection. Overall, educators can take the advantage of this new norm in education to delve into many areas that can enhance teaching and learning practices.

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