

A blended approach in teaching an EAP course: Malaysian instructors' perceptions of the new course materials

WONG FOOK FEI

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
FSSK, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Malaysia
wff@ukm.my*

THANG SIEW MING

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
FSSK, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Malaysia*

NOORIZAH MOHD NOOR

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
FSSK, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Malaysia*

HAFIZAH LATIF

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
FSSK, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Malaysia*

MOHD SALLEHHUDIN ABD. AZIZ

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
FSSK, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study which examines instructors' perceptions of the new commercial course materials that comprises a course book and online practice reinforcement activities. The materials were used to teach undergraduate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course for Social Sciences at a Malaysian public university. This represents the main facet of the blended approach introduced when the course was redesigned. The sample comprises ten instructors who taught the course for one semester. Three qualitative instruments were utilized to elicit data namely, instructor-researcher reflective notes, focus group discussion and one-to-one interviews. The results of the study were generally positive, however, two main concerns were raised. The first was regarding the difficulty level of the reading comprehension activities in the course book which majority of the instructors felt were too simple and not challenging enough for their students. The second was on internet connectivity to the online practice website which the instructors felt was too slow and was unable to support the students efficiently. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the findings and provides suggestions for the next cycle of the research.

Keywords: commercial instructional materials; material evaluation; blended learning; online teaching and learning; action research

INTRODUCTION

The EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses offered by institutions of higher learning in Malaysia usually use commercial textbooks. EAP here refers to the learning of English for the purposes of meeting the academic demands of studying in an institution of higher learning. This practice is hardly surprising as there are a number of good reasons for doing so. First, a course book provides the syllabus and structure for a course (Richards 2001). This frees the ESL teachers from having to systematically plan and develop a course from scratch as they might not have the time and resources, and in the Malaysian context, the local English teachers might not have adequate knowledge and expertise in curriculum design to do so. Second, publishers such as Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press are renowned for the quality of their ESL textbooks, which are widely used globally. Their books are generally well written, have been piloted on students, and reviewed by experts and teachers before they are marketed globally ensuring quality content. They are also visually attractive and come with ancillaries such as a teacher guide, workbook, audio CD and online materials (the latest addition) to attract users. Furthermore, criticisms against commercial EAP textbooks such as: being socio-culturally bias towards an American or British contexts, containing socio-cultural information that is alien to the learners, and using native speaker models (Goh 1999), are now mostly not true. Publishers are now more sensitive to the needs of the ESL/EFL market and more focused on developing ESL/EFL communicative competence. There are many EAP texts that are intended for an ESL/EFL learning context, with reading passages that would appeal to all cultures and tasks that are social and culturally neuter.

It is crucial that the best and the most suitable teaching materials be adopted since “nothing influences the content of teaching and learning more than the books and other teaching materials used.” (Cunningsworth 1995, p.v). Despite this, there is surprisingly little research done on the commercially available materials adopted by educational institutions. Most articles are on how to develop and evaluate materials, how to select and use textbooks (Goh 1999, Richards 2001, Ur 1996), and on their role in language teaching (Ball & Cohen 1996, Richards 1993). All are prescriptive rather than evidence-based. This study investigates the effectiveness of the newly introduced commercial materials that consist of the conventional course book and web-based self-access practice. This represents the main facet of a redesigned EAP (English for Academic purposes) course that advocates a blending approach to learning. While both teachers and students’ feedback were collected, this paper will only discuss how instructors perceived the new commercial materials after using them for one semester.

THE COURSE

At the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), a research-focused public university in Malaysia, an EAP course, English for Social Sciences (ESS), is offered as a compulsory course to its undergraduates. It is a four-hour per week course that runs for 14 weeks or one-semester. The primary aim of this course is “to enable students to develop study skills and academic proficiency in the English language”. Because it caters to the students’ immediate needs, they usually take it in the first year of their programme. The course adopts an integrated approach incorporating the macro skills of reading, writing and speaking within the context of the social sciences. At the end of the course, the students should be able to utilize the relevant academic reading skills and strategies to better comprehend reading materials related to their programmes, interact confidently in group discussions, make short presentations as well as express ideas and formulate opinions in writing. To achieve its objective a series of commercially available

course books were adopted. The course is run by the School of Language Studies and Linguistics (which is under the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities) and taught by a team of ESL (English as a Second Language) instructors from the School.

The course has been running for over a decade and through its 10-year history, there have been occasional adjustments and changes made to the course but no major comprehensive review has been undertaken.

THE REDESIGN

In mid-2011, a course review committee, comprising the chair of the School, the course committee and two other instructors, was formed to evaluate the ESS course with the intention of improving the course. During the meeting, issues of concerns were raised. One of them pertains to instructional materials, a key component of any language programmes. Those who have taught the course pointed out that there was currently no learning support beyond the classroom for students. They believed that this was one of the reasons for the lack of progress in their command of English. Problems regarding the course book were also raised. At that time, a common textbook was used for students of all levels of proficiency in English and there was a general consensus at the meeting that the prescribed course book was too difficult for students with low English proficiency₁ who formed approximately 70% of the FSSH student population based on the 2011/2012 intake. The reading passages were also said to be outdated and activities boring. This was not surprising since the text was published in 2007 and had been in use for six semesters.

Therefore, the review committee decided that the course should incorporate an online component and this decision was spurred on by the realisation that technology has impacted students' lifestyles in a ubiquitous way. Almost all UKM students have a handphone and a laptop and they can connect to the internet most of the time while they are on campus through the various wired and wireless systems available. In addition they spent a substantial amount of their time communicating with friends through texting, chatting and social networking (Thang, Najihah & Norizan 2012). These are the "Net generation" (Tapscotts 1998) and to engage with them, experts have generally agreed that there is a need to include other modes of delivery and adopt some 21st century pedagogical approaches such as self-pace, self-access and independent learning, learner-centred activities and assessment for learning.

Due to the various considerations above, the ESS course was redesigned using the blended learning model proposed by proponents such as Albrecht (2006), Kerres and De Witt (2003), Rubenstein (2003), and Watson (2008). This model combines face-to-face instruction with other delivery methods aimed at providing an efficient and effective learning experience. The main facet of the redesign involved the introduction of two course books from the same series, *Q: Skills for Success: Reading and Writing: Level 2* (McVeigh & Jennifer 2011) was selected for the less proficient students and *Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing Level 3* (Gramer & Ward 2011) for the more proficient. . Since the proficiency levels of the students were diverse, the committee decided that this was the most expeditious way of resolving the issue. Although different levels are used, the macro skills taught are about similar for both texts. Besides meeting the main criteria for the selection of a course book as outlined by Cunningsworth (1995), Richards (2001) and Ur (1996), the main factor that tipped the scale in the series' favour was that it not only has the usual print materials (course book, instructional CDs and teacher guide) but it also has online support. This paper deals with the retrospective evaluation of these materials. Besides being directly relevant to the development of the current course, the findings are also relevant and useful to other ESL practitioners in similar ESL learning context who are planning to implement a blended learning approach using commercially available materials.

BLENDDED LEARNING

Various education transformations or paradigm shifts have emerged to create new models of teaching and learning. One such model is ‘blended learning’ (BL). Various definitions of blended learning have been offered. It has been described as a ‘pedagogical approach that combines effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment (Dzuiban, Hartman, & Moskal 2004, p.2), combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches (Whitelock & Jefts 2003), as well as mix of different didactic methods and delivery formats (Kerres & De Witt 2003). The learning content of blended learning is delivered through several methods, for example, face-to-face interactions, self-paced, individualized learning and online interactions (Rubenstein 2003, Watson 2008). More importantly, the components in this approach should produce a balanced integration between traditional strategies and technology to ensure achievable learning outcomes (Kerres & DeWitt 2003).

Previous studies conducted to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning have reported both positive and negative responses. Albrecht (2006) discovered that students preferred a ‘moderate’ inclusion of technology in their normal face-to-face courses as they felt that technology would provide them new learning opportunities. Similarly, Dzuiban et al (2004) discovered that technology empowered their students and led them to become more responsive and active in their learning. However, some studies expressed reservations on its impact on overall learning and development. Some potential problems found included anxiety, and confusion (Piccolli, Ahmad & Ives 2001), limited classroom interaction time (Laine, 2003) and difficulty for online users to make a time commitment to learning (Golladay, Prybutok & Huff, 2000). In the Malaysia context, Hisham Dzakiria, Che Su Mustafa & Hassan Abu Bakar (2006) further reported that Malaysian learners in general found BL difficult to grapple with. They were more reserved and passive and appeared at a loss especially when explicit instructions were not given for online tasks. This underscores the importance of learner support and training for teachers (Pineda-Herrero, Quesada & Stoian 2011).

ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The advent of ICT and the internet has profoundly influenced the way knowledge is conveyed and learned. Through this technology, the learning content is delivered through the internet or other forms of media technologies such as, e-mail, blogs and Facebook. Currently various forms of e-learning are implemented by many educational institutions such as the use of self-paced independent study units, asynchronous interactive sessions (where participants interact at different times) or synchronous interactive settings (where learners meet in real time).

Although the prospective of e-learning continues to develop, there are some concerns on its impact not only on students’ learning and development but more importantly, on teachers’ views of the use of technology in the classroom. As some researchers (Siemens 2010, Xu and Wang 2010) have pointed out, teachers in such hybrid environments undergo a radical shift in their roles to support the learning opportunities of their students. The concern is whether these teachers are comfortable or prepared to teach online. In the traditional face-to-face classrooms, teachers are already assuming multiple roles to support and manage student learning. In online classrooms, they face even more challenging roles. Related studies (Smith and Kurthen 2007, Son, Robb & Indra 2011, Thang et al 2010) have shown teachers’ apprehension and disconcertion on their roles as facilitators within an e-learning

environment. Some reasons cited include uncertainty in interacting with students in online forums and lacking in basic ICT skills as well as more advance ICT skills for evaluating and developing online content. Studies in this area in the Malaysian ESL context are limited. Hence it is felt that this paper which investigates the Malaysian university teachers' perceptions of a course that uses a blended approach to teach ESL will raise our awareness and understanding of how technology can effectively enhance learning as well as teaching.

MATERIALS AND MATERIAL EVALUATION

According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998 pp.170-171), EAP materials have four main purposes: as learning support, as a source of language, for motivation and stimulation and for reference. In view of their importance, teachers should invest considerable amount of effort and time in selecting, evaluating and adapting materials to support their teaching in order to facilitate student learning. Such evaluations are intrinsic to teaching and learning as they provide “valuable information for the future of classroom practice, the planning of courses and management of learning tasks by students” (Rea-Dickins & Germaine 1994, p.4).

Literature has identified three basic types of ELT materials evaluation. The first involves an intuitive or impressionistic approach. This form of evaluation is neither comprehensive nor systematic as it involves skimming through materials to obtain a ‘first impression’ of the materials (Hemsley 1997). The second approach is a formal prior-to-use evaluation and is widely advocated (Chambers 1997). It is accepted as systematic and comprehensive as developed checklists of criteria are used for a step by step examination of the materials. The third approach proposed by Ellis (1997) is classified into two types: predictive and retrospective. Predictive evaluation is conducted when teachers need to determine which materials are best suited for their students. Conversely, retrospective evaluation is conducted to investigate if the materials used have worked out for them. This study adopts the latter approach as this form of feedback or ‘reflective evaluation’ (McLean & Blackwell 1997, Mukundan 2007, Reed, Davis & Nyabanyaba 2002) allows teachers to gain a better understanding of their own teaching approaches which will lead to positive changes of previous practices and enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. It is a continuous process as teachers are constantly making instructional decisions and modifying teaching methods. It also serves as a learning opportunity for teachers to review and reflect on their teaching, and to refine and improve their practice.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To reiterate, in this study, the researchers adopted a hybrid type evaluation involving retrospective evaluation (Blackwell 1997, McLean & Mukundan 2007, Reed, Davis & Nyabanyaba 2002) to gain deeper insights into teachers' feedback regarding the utilisation of the new course book and the online practice.

The two specific objectives of the study are 1) to investigate the instructors' feedback and responses of the *Q Series course books*, 2) to evaluate the instructors' perception of the web-based online component of the *Q Series*. Questions asked covered aspects they like or dislike about the course book and online practice, problems they faced using them, and whether their use should be continued in future semesters.

textbooks from various publishers, the *Q Series* which comes accompanied by online practice activities was identified as appropriate to be used for the course. Published in 2011 by Oxford University Press, *Q: Skills for Success* is a six-level series with two strands: first is Reading and Writing and second, Listening and Speaking. The first strand was selected as it is in line with the focal point, reading. Each of the 10 units in the course book comprises explicit instructions and practice in all four language skills.

This series was selected due to a number of reasons. The first and most important reason is the fact that the series offered a package, a course book that teachers could use for face-to-face classroom instruction and practice exercises that students could do online at their own time and pace. The latter frees the instructors from having to mark the students' reinforcement exercises as students can check and grade the exercises on their own. In addition, these online exercises provided opportunities for students to work on enhancing their skills beyond the classroom. Besides reinforcement exercises, the online resource also contains extra notes on certain teaching points and audio recordings of the reading passages.

The second reason for choosing the series is because it meets the overall learning goal of the course, which is to develop academic English skills of the students with a particular focus on reading skills. Moreover, the learning outcome of each unit is clearly stated so students would know its purpose and thus, can keep track of their own progress. Each topic is also current and is related to issues in social sciences, the context of the course. Finally, the committee felt that the teachers as well as the students would find the topics appealing and engaging. Based on these considerations, the series was adopted.

II. IMPLEMENTING THE INTERVENTION

SAMPLE STUDY

To determine the effects of the intervention, wholly qualitative research tools were used to elicit data from 10 out of the 11 instructors who were teaching the course during Semester 1, 2011/2012 session. One instructor was excluded as she had to go on a long medical leave prior to the data-collection period. The age group, academic qualification, the number of teaching experience and their role(s) in the research (besides being an instructor) of all respondents are presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. Details of the Respondents

Instructor	Age Group (Years)	Highest Academic Qualification	Number of Teaching Experience (Years)	Additional role(s)
A	≥ 50	MA	20 and above	Researcher & facilitator for focus group discussion
B	40 – 49	PhD	20 and above	Researcher & interviewer
C	≥ 50	PhD	20 and above	-
D	≥ 50	PhD	20 and above	-
E	≥ 50	MA	20 and above	-
F	40 – 49	PhD	10 to 19	-
G	≥ 50	MA	20 and above	-
H	≥ 50	MA	20 and above	-
J	≥ 50	MA	20 and above	-
M	≥ 50	PhD	20 and above	Researcher

Table 1 shows that the instructors were experienced and well-qualified with all having postgraduate qualifications. Ninety percent of the instructors had over 20 years of teaching experience, and only one instructor (F) had between 10 -19 years of experience. Instructors A, C, D, E and F taught the MUET 1 and 2 students while instructors B, G, H, J and M taught the MUET 3 and above students. Three of the instructors, (A, B and M) were involved in the study as researchers. Instructors A and B were involved in the data collection, A as facilitator for the focus group discussion while B was the interviewer for the one-to-one interviews.

Three qualitative data collection methods were utilized namely instructor-researcher written reviews, focus group discussion and semi- guided interviews. Two instructors (A and B) were asked to provide their responses to the questions in the form of written reviews. This was considered the best method for them to provide their input as they were researchers of this study. They completed their reviews about a week after the course ended and prior to the focus group discussion and interviews. This was important as the research team did not want their feedback to be influenced by the opinions expressed during the other data gathering sessions.

Next, data were also collected from a focus group discussion. Focus group was selected because it is widely considered as a useful tool for exploring “not only how people think but what they think and why they think that way” (Kitzinger 1995, p. 299). Besides being useful for delving into people’s experiences and attitudes, the group processes arising from the discussion, could help participants to explore and to clarify their views and opinions in relation to that expressed by others in the group. It was believed that the group dynamics would generate more authentic and richer data that would not be as easily accessible in the more restrained one-to-one interview (Berg 2004, Kitzinger 1995).

In line with the objective of the study, all instructors responded to the following questions despite the different instruments used:

- What do you like about the Q series textbooks?
- What do you dislike about the Q series textbooks?
- Do you think we should continue using the Q series course book? Why?
- What do you think about the Q-online practice?
- What kind of problems did the students face?
- Do you think we should continue to use online practice?

The focus group discussion sessions took place about a week after the end of the course when the experience of teaching the course was still fresh in the instructors’ mind. Initially, the researchers planned to have two focus group discussions. However, after carrying out the first focus group, it was decided that semi-structured individual interview would be a better choice for the second group of instructors. Two reasons contributed to this change in decision. First was the problem of the respondents having the tendency to frequently deviate from the topic of discussion. Kitzinger pointed out that real opinion related to the issue could be encapsulated in these diversions (Kitzinger 1995). However, the data revealed no “real opinion” related to the topic discussed in the diversions. The second reason which was more worrying was the tendency of the respondents to be unduly influenced by the opinions of the others which made the moderator wondered whether they would have similar views if they were not privy to each other’s opinion.

Based on these, it was decided that a different approach was required to obtain data from the remaining four instructors (G, H, J and M). Individual interviews, each averaging around 15 minutes, were then conducted with the instructors using the same questions. All the interviews were audio- taped and transcribed verbatim. An analysis of the transcripts of the interview sessions revealed that the data collected using this approach were more insightful and focused compared to those from the focus group discussion.

The eclectic data collection procedure might appear to lack the rigid of an empirical research. However, it must be realized that this is a teacher-based action research that brings together theory and action, in the form of an intervention, and research, in the form of an assessment and evaluation of the intervention. The approach posits that it is the practitioners reflecting on and researching in their immediate environment who are in the best position to investigate, understand and innovate in curriculum related issues and challenges. While not all of our teacher-researchers were involved as data collectors, the two who were involved

were acting as ‘sounding board’ (Carr & Kemmis 1986, p.203) for practitioners to reflect on their class practice and to discover the reasons for their own action. They were mindful that their involvement in the data-collection might be considered prejudicial, and they therefore avoided giving their own opinion of the course during the sessions. Also, the procedure might be construed as being disorganized, again this is a feature of the action research process where one ‘do and reflect’, and change to meet the challenges that arise (Burn 2010).

II. OBSERVING THE EFFECTS OF THE INTERVENTION

The following section reports on the responses of the instructors to the questions posed to them. The discussion will be based on the themes that emerged from the data.

THE Q SERIES COURSE BOOK

As stated earlier, two different levels of the Q series were used (Level 2 and 3), based on the students’ proficiency. In this discussion, no distinction was made between instructors teaching the two levels as there was no obvious difference in their opinions that could be attributed solely to this variable. However, where this is a determining factor, it will be pointed out.

The Strengths

Nine out of the ten instructors had positive perceptions of the books. To them this series has many attractive features such as its colourful visual layout and well-structured content organization which they found refreshing and appealing. Content-wise, all instructors gave affirmative comments regarding the topics covered by the course books. They used adjectives like “*interesting*”, “*current*”, “*relevant*”, “*motivating*”, “*inspiring*”, “*close to them (students)*” to describe the selected topics and reading passages. D and F liked the use of questions as unit titles in the series and the pre-reading discussion questions that activate the students’ background knowledge of the topics prior to reading the passage. They felt that since the students’ general knowledge was “*very poor*”, the “*questioning approach*” was a good way to trigger their prior knowledge. More importantly, C, D, E and F were of the opinion that some of the features (‘learning outcome’ at the start of the unit and ‘keeping track of your success’ at the end) could encourage students to be independent or “take charge of their own learning.” As summed up by instructor H, “*the book had that self-autonomous feel about it*” meaning that the book is designed to encourage learner independence.

The Limitations

In terms of what they disliked about the course books in the Q series, there were somewhat mixed perceptions. One of the main views shared by instructors A, B and C was that the exercises, in particular the reading comprehension exercises that accompanied the reading passages in every unit were “*a little bit easy*” as they were “*a little simple and direct*”, and thus “*not challenging at all especially for tertiary-level students.*” The comprehension questions also did not require the students to apply critical thinking skills or to read between the lines; skills considered important when reading academic texts and journal articles. This appears to contradict what instructors said earlier that the passages were interesting. However, this appears to be the case for this series. The reason for the simplicity could be because the intent of these exercises was to enforce the sub-skills. By making the questions easy, students could apply the sub-skills that are the focus of the exercise with ease.

However, two other instructors (D and F) who were teaching two different levels respectively opined that the difficulty level matched the abilities of their students and they argued that for the more proficient students it was really up to the teachers to prepare more

challenging activities for them and to supplement the exercises in the course books. This stance was supported by H who was teaching the higher level as he equally felt that instructors “*have to think of new things to do in class*” as most of the exercises could be completed easily and quickly.

M was the only instructor who was rather unenthusiastic about the topics in the course book in general. He declared that some of the topics were not to his liking and not very interesting. M appears to be the only dissenting voice as the other nine instructors were very happy with the topics and passages used in the series. His taste in reading materials was clearly different from the others. He preferred the old course book, *New Headway*. This could be because the previous book adopts a more teacher-centred approach which suits M teaching style while the present series is more learner-centred.

Continued Use

Although all nine instructors were “*generally happy*” with the course books in the Q series, they were reluctant to express full support for the continued use of the series and suggested that the book be used for one or two more semesters. There was apparent support for the continuation of the series from instructor J who commented, “*the book suits my students’ level*” and G who believed, “*we should continue using the series, the books are interesting and students can adapt, they enjoyed the discussion sections.*”

On the contrary, both M and H were apprehensive because they were not comfortable with the learner-centred approach of the book that requires the instructor merely to facilitate rather than teach. H remarked, “*I got the feeling when I use this book that I’m supposed to facilitate rather than teach. There’s nothing left to teach really - exercises upon exercises or read and read and that’s all they do.*” Likewise, M felt that the book has too many task-based activities that require a lot of monitoring on the instructors’ part.

On the other hand, instructor C would like to see the actual improvement in the students’ performance first before making a decision on continuing the use of the course books. C equated the effectiveness of the course book to students’ performance. He felt that if a course book is good then students should improve and this would show in their test performance. This expectation is not realistic as the course is only a 56-hour course and the students have had 11 years of English instruction prior to taking it. It is not realistic to expect dramatic improvement in learners’ performance. Furthermore, good instructional material is only one element out of a compendium of factors that contribute to successful language learning.

THE Q ONLINE PRACTICE

The Strengths

All instructors concurred that having an online component was an excellent idea in that it provides supplementary exercises for students to reinforce their learning of the various language skills. They found the online exercises innovative and refreshing. Apart from saving the instructors’ time on marking since the system would immediately and automatically score the exercises completed by the students. Instructors also opined that the online practice was motivating for students as it encourages them to be self-directed, independent learners.

For reinforcement purposes, students can attempt the exercises as many times as they want and they can monitor their own progress. Instructor G reported that she received positive feedback from her students who reported that they had “*improved a lot in their grammar*”. Instructor D reported that her students were captivated by the online practice “*because they can do it on their own*” and the marks given for the completed exercises had driven students to “*want to try and try.*” She relayed the case of one student who tried “7, 8

times” illustrating the excitement and sense of accomplishment the student must have experienced when her scores improved after each attempt.

The Limitations

While instructor C questioned the awarding of marks to students for doing the online practice, A was unsatisfied that students seemed to be ‘forced’ to complete the assigned online task, and they did it in the last minute. According to her, most of her students only accessed the website at the end of the course. They did the online exercise just to earn the marks allocated to this and not because they genuinely wanted to improve. Instructor C felt that this practice contradicted the objective of the online practice which was to develop independent learning. He believed that students should do the online practice voluntarily and not be compelled to do so because of the marks. On top of that, he argued that it was difficult to award marks fairly especially when students had problems accessing and completing the online tasks. He urged instructors to give full mark to their students since their inability to complete the online exercises was not entirely their fault and beyond their control. Instructor D, on the other hand, advocated for a “fairer” system of awarding marks, one that is based not only on their effort but also on their language proficiency.

Instructor D, on the other hand, advocated for a “fairer” system of awarding marks, one that is based not only on their effort but also on their language proficiency. He also raised the point that the online practice was meaningless as there was no input from the teacher. Students might attempt the practice numerous times just to get high score but were clueless as to why the item was right or wrong. Like Instructors A, D felt that “[students] do for the sake of doing” and “probably don’t know why they got it right”. She also felt that the students had to be of a certain level of proficiency to be able to appreciate working independently on their own but at lower level, they still need guidance. On the same issue, Instructor M didn’t think that “there’s any difference in terms of the learning process” involved in doing the online practice and he could not see “any meaningful gain from doing such online exercises”.

M was the only instructor who thought that the online practice was currently “not appropriate” and suggested that studies be done to see the effectiveness of the web-based exercises. According to him, “learning English is not just [an] online thing...it depends on the instructors in ... making the class interesting making the sure that the students learn and ... gain something from learning the language.” His conclusion that the online practice was not appropriate was due to the connectivity issue which will be discussed in the next section. His latter remark suggests that he is teacher-centric and believes that teachers should be in control of students’ learning.

Problems Faced By Students

Accessibility to the Q-online website was the major problem faced by the students. All instructors received similar complaints from their students that the poor internet connection on campus had prevented them from accessing and completing the online exercise speedily. Students wasted time trying to gain access to the website and some reported that they had to borrow their friends’ broadband, go to the cybercafés or wait till the 2 or 3 am in the morning to get connected and attempt the practice. Voicing the frustration of students, Instructor C said, “When I [a student] want to do it now, I [he/she] should be able to and not have to wait till 1 or 2 am.” Instructors felt that the poor internet connection was grossly unfair to the students who wasted a lot of time trying to gain access to the website, and waiting to get a score.

Continued use

On whether the online practice should be continued, 9 out of the 10 instructors agreed that it should be continued as it was an innovative, fun, and interesting way to promote independent and autonomous learning. Instructors G, H and J reported that their students enjoyed doing the online practice and they spent time doing the exercises since they were not too difficult. Instructor J added that the online practice also serves as a tool for “*some students who are weak in just certain skills*” to improve as they could practice outside class. Additionally, H suggested that the online practice should not be “*exclusively for students’ use*” outside classroom. Instead, the online practice could be done together in class since he thought that is where the “*real challenge*” is for the students.

Aside for the internet connectivity issue and some dissatisfaction over the fact that marks were given for the online activities, all instructors agreed that since it was a part of the Q series package, students, especially the weak ones, have to be made to do the practice as it would be beneficial for them.

IV. REFLECTING ON THE OBSERVATION

As the reading passages and the attendant questions utilized in the Q series have some limitations as evidenced by various feedbacks from instructors, the course committee could organise a workshop to come up with supplementary questions for the passages that encourage higher level comprehension skills and critical thinking. This could be a part of a research project on material development. Additionally, there should be a study to investigate if there is a mismatch between the levels of difficulty of the selected course books with the students’ proficiency levels. Specifically, students with better proficiency (MUET bands 4 and 5) might need a higher level course book. The course committee could look into further dividing the higher proficiency group into two. Administratively, this will be unwieldy and will further complicate assessment.

As to the online practice, the major problem relates to connectivity issues which could be solved if the exercises can be downloaded and made available offline or on a CD. Another issue pertains to the awarding of marks. While there is general agreement that a nominal mark be given, the questions of what assessment criteria to award mark have not been resolved. Should marks be awarded for effort alone since the purpose is to assess for learning? The issue that could also be investigated is whether the awarding of this marks do encourage learning. Also related to this is whether students gain from doing the mostly discrete-type exercises. It is presumed that the students benefit from attempting the practice but do they really benefit?

LIMITATIONS OF THE FIRST CYCLE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE SECOND CYCLE

One of the limitations that can be identified from the methodology was the questions used in the investigation. The six questions centred on two main aspects namely the strengths and weaknesses of the course books and the online practice. The questions were focused on the overall purpose which was to assess the effectiveness of the intervention on teaching and learning, and therefore not based on material evaluation frameworks such as Ur’s (1996) or Richards’s (2001). More insightful perspective could perhaps be gained had there been questions based on the specifics of the framework.

Another limitation relates to the research tools used and data collection procedure. As mentioned earlier, the review notes, focus group and one-to-one interviews were used. The

most detailed and insightful accounts were from the review notes. This suggests that the act of having to write down their feelings made the respondents think more deeply about their answers. Also, they referred to the course book when writing. The focus group participants as well as the interviewees did not refer to the course book when giving their opinions. This was an oversight and on hindsight, we realized that the instructors could have remembered more and be able to give specific examples had they referred to the book. Hence, for the next cycle of the study, the instructors would be asked to write down their responses to the questions, and they would be requested to give specific examples from the course book. Another qualitative tool that was not used in the first cycle is the teachers' reflective journal. For the next cycle, individual teacher could be asked to keep a journal during the course and these selected instructors could record how they use the course book in class, their feelings about it and their students' response.

To conclude, for the first cycle, our inquiry was more exploratory and provides us with an overview of how instructors perceived the new materials. For the second cycle, our inquiry will focus more on how teachers and students use the course book and online practice, and the insights gained from the first cycle that has been discussed will be implemented. There is no denying that this study is context-specific. Nevertheless, we feel that insights gained from this research would resonant with other ESL practitioners working in similar situation who are also dependent on commercial materials, and inspire similar action-based research on curriculum development issues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by a research grant provided by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM-PTS-2012-105).

ENDNOTES

1. Students who obtained Band 1 (extremely limited user) or Band 2 (limited user) for their Malaysia University English Test (MUET)).

REFERENCES

- Albrecht B. (2006). Enriching student experience through Blended Learning. Educause Center for Applied Research, Research Bulletin, 12; 2006. Retrieved June 6, 2012 from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERB0612.pdf>.
- Ball, D.L & Cohan, D.K. (1996) Reform by the book: what is: or might be: the role of curriculum materials in teacher learning and instructional reform? *Educational Researcher*. Vol. 25, No. 9 (Dec), 6-14
- Berg, B.L. (2004). *Qualitative Research Methods for Social Sciences (5th Edition)*. Boston: Pearson
- Burn, A. (2010). *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioner*. New York: Routledge
- Carr, W and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Chambers, F. (1997). Seeking consensus in coursebook evaluation. *ELT Journal*. 51(1), 30-35
- Cunningsworth, A. (1995) *Choosing Your Coursebook*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Dudley Evans and St John, (1998). *Developments in English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dziuban, C., Hartman, J. & Moskal, P. (2004) Blended learning. Educause Center for Applied Research, *Research Bulletin*, 7. Retrieved June 25, 2012 from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERB0407.pdf>
- Ellis, R. (1997). The empirical evaluation of language teaching materials. *ELT Journal*. 51(1), 36-42.
- Goh, C.C.M 1998. Emerging environments of English for academic purposes and the implication for learning Materials. *RELC Journal* 1998. 29:20, 20-33.
- Golladay, R., Prybutok, V. & Huff, R. (2000). Critical success factors for the online learner. *Journal of*

- Computer Information Systems, 40(4), 69-71.
- Gramer, M. F. and Ward, C. S. (2011). *Q: Skills for Success: Reading and Writing. Level 3*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hemsley, M. (1997). The evaluation of teachers' guides design and application. *ELT Journal*, 3(1), 72-83.
- Hisham Dzakiria, Che Su Mustafa & Hassan Abu Bakar. (2006). Moving forward with Blended Learning (BL) as a pedagogical alternative to traditional classroom learning, *Malaysian Online Journal of Instructional Technology (MOJIT)*. Vol.3 (1), 11-18.
- Kemmis, S and McTaggart, R. (1988). *The Action Research Planner (3rd Edition)*. Victoria Australia: Deakin University Press. Reprinted 1997
- Kerres, M & de Witt, C. (2003). A didactic framework for the design of blended learning arrangement. *Journal of Education Media*, Vol. 28, Issue 2-3, 101-113.
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). Introducing focus group. *BMJ*, Vol. 311, 29 July, 299-301. Retrieved June 4, 2012 from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2550365/pdf/bmj00603-0031.pdf>
- Laine, L. (2003). Is e-learning effective for IT training? *T +D*, 57(6), 55-60.
- MacIsaac, D. (1995). An Introduction to Action Research. Retrieved January 20, 2002 from <http://www.Phy.nau.edu/~danmac/actionrsch.html>.
- McLean, M. & Blackwell, R. (1997). Opportunity knocks. Professionalism and excellence in university teaching. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 3, 85–99.
- McVeigh, J and Bixby, J. (2011). *Q: Skills for Success: Reading and Writing Level 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mukundan, J. (2007). Evaluation of English language textbooks. Some Important issues for consideration. *Journal of NELTA*. 12, No. 1-2, December, 80-84.
- Piccoli, G., Ahmad, R. & Ives, B. (2001). Web-based virtual learning environments: A research framework and a preliminary assessment of effectiveness in basic IT skills training. *MIS Quarterly*. Vol. 25(4), 401-425.
- Pineda-Herrero, P., Quesada, C. & Stoian, A. (2011). Evaluating the efficacy of e-learning in Spain: a diagnosis of learning transfer factors affecting e-learning. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 30, 2199 – 2203.
- Rea-Dickins, P. and K. Germaine. (1992). *Evaluation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reed, Y., Davis, H., & Nyabanyaba, T. (2002). Investigating teachers' 'take-up' of reflective practice from an In-service professional development teacher education programme in South Africa. *Educational Action Research*. (10)2, 253-274.
- Richards, J. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Rubenstein, H. (2003). Recognizing e-learning's potential & pitfalls. *Learning & Training Innovations*, 4(4), 38.
- Siemens, G. (2010) Struggling for a metaphor for change. *Connectivism: Networked and Social Learning*. Retrieved December 2, 2010 from <http://www.connectivism.ca/>
- Smith, G.G & Kurthen, H. (2007) Front-stage and back-stage in hybrid e-learning face-to-face courses. *International Journal on E-Learning*. Vol. 6(3), 455-75.
- Son, Jeong-Bae; Robb, T. & Indra Charismiadi. (2011). Computer Literacy and Competency: A Survey of Indonesian Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. *Call-EJ*, Vol. 12 (1), 26-42.
- Tapscott, D. (1988) *Growing up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Thang Siew Ming, Hazita Azman, Radha Nambiar, Lee Kean Wah, Yuen Chee Keong & Leila Bidmeshki. (2009). Teachers' views of their involvement in an online community of practice project, *Call-EJ*, 11(1). Retrieved June 7, 2012 from <http://www.tell.is.ritsumei.ac.jp/callejonline/journal/11-1/contents11-1.html>
- Thang Siew Ming, Puvaneswary Murugaiah, Lee Kean Wah, Hazita Azman, Tan Lay Yean & Lee Yit Sim. (2010). Grappling with technology: A case of supporting Malaysian Smart school teachers' professional development. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*. Vol.26, No.3, 400-416.
- Thang Siew Ming, Najihah Mahmud & Norizan Abd Razak. (2012). The use of wireless technology in UKM: Challenges faced and its impact on English language learning. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. 18(1): 129-143.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watson, J. (2008). Blending Learning: The Convergence of Online and Face-to-Face Education. Retrieved February 12, 2011 from http://www.inacol.org/research/promisingpractices/NACOL_PP-BlendedLearning-lr.pdf
- Whitlock, D & Jefts, A. (2003). Editorial: Journal of Education Media special issue on Blended Learning. *Journal of Educational Media*. 28(2-3), 99-100.

- Xu, Z. & Wang, L. (2010) Discourse analysis on hybrid learning and teaching and the changing roles of teachers and students in Hong Kong. In Wang, F. L., Fong, J, and Kwan, R.C (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on Hybrid Learning Models: Advanced Tools, Technologies, and Applications* (pp. 284-298). Hershey, NY: Information Science Reference: