

PREFERENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF LPBS TESL (PRIMARY) PARTICIPANTS ON ON-LINE CONFERENCING

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings on the study of the preferred mode of on-line conferencing by LPBS participants with the MPBL college lecturers. Being an on-going research, the study acts as a starting point to aid the participants as they undertake this 1 1/2 -year ESL programme. In doing so, the study hopes to shed some light on some of the problems they encountered and to reflect on how these strategies may help lecturers to carry out these conferencing/tutorial sessions, more effectively. The survey method was used to collect data on participants' background information which comprised 20 participants. These participants are currently teaching in various primary schools in Sarawak. Course participants' preferred choice of conferencing mode were obtained through the administration of a questionnaire. Data obtained from the 20 participants were collected and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Percentage and frequency count were computed to study participants' choice of mode. Data based on the open-ended questions given to the participants in the questionnaires were analysed qualitatively. From the findings, the study showed that conferencing through e-mail is the most preferred mode of on-line communication by LPBS participants with the MPBL college lecturers in enabling participants to cope with the demands of the programme. However, from the open-ended questions, respondents are of the opinion that there is an urgent need to improve on the availability and accessibility of support facilities at the school level to facilitate programme delivery.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of this On-Line Learning (OLL) programme is in line with the goals of the Ministry of Education in empowering its teaching staff by equipping them with the competence to participate actively and productively in this era of knowledge and information technology. The programme serves as an opening for these non-English optionist graduate teachers all of whom are presently serving in primary schools. In short, they have to act as agents of change. In this fast moving

innovative era of education technology, teachers need to move ahead of students in order to play the roles expected of them. To do this, it is imperative that teachers not only be content knowledgeable but also technologically-savvy to perform in their jobs.

Since these teachers only meet with the lecturers during the school holidays, the implementation of the OLL programme can overcome the lack of face to face conferencing. In using the above strategies to carry out the conferencing/tutorial sessions, participants were asked to take note of the problems they encountered and to reflect on how the strategy has helped them. Subsequently, the study will also look at the availability and accessibility of human and physical resources provided at the college where the programme is conducted. This is important because the success or failure of a programme in achieving its targeted objectives is greatly influenced by the support facilities available.

Specifically, in the end, this study aims to obtain some feedback on the effectiveness and suitability of the OLL strategy in achieving its objectives. In addition, this study also attempts to look into the availability and accessibility of human and physical resources as support facilities provided at the college where the programme was conducted.

These participants come into college for face to face interaction only during the school holidays. However, classroom observations and lecturers' evaluation based on their lecture interaction during the contact hours with these participants seem to reveal a gap in the content level of these participants that is required to enable them to complete the required assignments. These participants encountered problems in coping with the subject matter in terms of conceptual understanding of abstract ideas, hence, frequent academic conferencing sessions are necessary to help them complete their work and meet assignment deadlines. Group work and peer support were regular features of their daily routine for survival on the programme. However, when they return to school, it was difficult for them to juggle their time between study and managing their heavy workload. Many were teaching full load in their respective schools and they were further handicapped by their lack of face to face interaction with the respective lecturers.

Research Objective

To conduct a survey on the preferences of conferencing between LPBS participants and college lecturers through chat on line, forum/discussion and board mail.

Research Question

Which mode of carrying out conferencing/tutorial sessions is most preferred by LPBS participants?

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to survey the preferred mode of on-line conferencing by LPBS participants with the MPBL college lecturers. Being an on-going research, the study acts as a starting point to find out ways to aid the participants as they undertake this 1 1/2 -year ESL programme. In doing so, the study hopes to reveal the preferred mode of conferencing of course participants, and in turn, allows the lecturers to reflect on how these strategies may help them carry out these conferencing/tutorial sessions more effectively.

Eventually, the study hopes to shed some light on the effectiveness of the OLL strategy as a tool not only to provide supplementary materials but also the required teaching-learning support to these participants to enable them to undertake the 1 1/2year ESL diploma programme.

Limitations of Study

The study is limited to LPBS/KPLI participants in Maktab Perguruan Batu Lintang, Kuching, Sarawak. The programme only began in November in the year 2004. Hence, the population sample is very small. This small number might compromise the reliability and validity of our research findings. Thus, our findings may not be reflective of the other LPBS/KPLI participants in other colleges. The constraints we faced such as shortage of lecturers and lack of physical availability and accessibility of support facilities at the college level to facilitate programme delivery may be unique to our college. It may not apply to other colleges.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The survey method was used to collect data on participants' background information and their preferences of conferencing mode with the college lecturers; forum/discussion board, E-mail and "Chat On Line".

Instrument

Course participants' preferences of conferencing/tutorial sessions were obtained through the administration of a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained the following sections:

- Part A: Background information of participants.
- Part B: Preferred Log in Time on OLL
Preferred Mode of conferencing on OLL
- Part C: Reasons for preference

Population of the study

This study was conducted on the twenty LPBS/TESL trainee teachers of the November 2004 intake. These 20 participants represented the first batch of the LPBS/TESL intake who will attend the course from November 2004 to June 2006. The participants comprise 6 males and 14 females.

Data Collection

The researchers distributed the questionnaires to this specific group of 20 participants when they came to college in June 2005. They were given one day to complete the questionnaires. The completed questionnaires were then collected immediately.

Data Analysis

In this study, the data obtained through the 20 sets of questionnaires were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Percentage and frequency count were computed to study participants' choice of mode. Data based on the open-ended questions given to the participants in the questionnaires were analysed qualitatively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Description of participants in the study

Eighteen of the participants possess a basic degree, with two having obtained their masters degree. Only one of the participants has no teaching experience. Fourteen of the participants have between one to three years of teaching experience, followed by four, who has between 4 to 6 years of teaching experience, leaving only one with more than six years of teaching experience.

Conferencing Preferences and Perceptions of Participants

From the findings, the study showed that conferencing through e-mail is the most preferred mode of on-line communication by LPBS participants with the MPBL college lecturers in enabling participants to cope with the demands of the programme. Out of the 20 participants, 14 of them picked e-mail as their preferred choice of communication. One of the reasons given by the participants for their preferred mode is that conferencing through e-mail is more personal and less time consuming for the participants. Respondents also mentioned that this mode allows them more time to think about the issues they wished to discuss or ask. They are also of the opinion that many issues can be discussed as attachments can be attached to the e-mail. Respondents also mentioned that this mode is "flexible" as not all the participants need to be on line at the same time. It also allows the participants to "read" the responses at their leisure.

However, from the open-ended questions, respondents are of the opinion that there is an urgent need to improve on the availability and accessibility of support facilities at the school level to facilitate programme delivery. Eight of the participants can only get access to the internet during school hours as their residences do not have the facilities. They complained that they do not have the leisure to surf the net or send emails due to their responsibilities during their working hours. To add to their woes, a few of their principals do not “encourage” the use of the internet; reasons given being the financial implications.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since 70% of the participants are in favour of conferencing through the internet, there should also be enough manpower at college level to ensure the successful implementation of the programme. As it is, only two lecturers are teaching the programme. And, two hours of on-line conferencing per lecturer is insufficient to cope with the demands made by the participants.

To ensure a smooth delivery of the programme, the BPG should ensure that there is sufficient manpower and expertise in terms of lecturers available at the college, so as not to over-burden existing lecturers and stress the participants who have to cope with both their teaching duties and the academic demands of their course.

A needs analysis should be done based on the participants who had enrolled on this programme so far in order to reflect their needs (linguistic or non-linguistic) realistically in a revised syllabus for the benefit of future participants.

It is undeniable that the effectiveness of this OLL programme has been compromised by various constraints, cultural, organisational and administrative factors, as well as factors pertaining to learners, teachers and materials.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It would be interesting for future researchers to explore certain aspects, one of them being the problems they encounter in their conferencing sessions and to reflect on how the strategy has helped them. Researchers can also make an in-depth analysis on respondents' age factor, work experience or academic qualifications and study to what extent these have any bearing on their responses.

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