THE IMPACT OF USING MODULES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIAN POLYTECHNICS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE VIEWS AND PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LECTURERS.

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Abstract

Using a teaching module to teach the English language as compared to the traditional method of using a textbook is meant to increase active learning and improve critical thinking, as well as problem solving skills. It also gives the lecturer the opportunity for conducting formative assessment in the classroom. Standardized textbooks have their own styles, and their contents, depth of coverage of materials, and organization, may affect the teaching and learning environment. Thus, the use of a module presents a more flexible learning environment for both instructors and learners. This study is aimed at analyzing lecturers’ views and perceptions on the impact of using modules in the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian Polytechnics. The study was conducted on 9 polytechnics situated in the Eastern zone, the Southern zone and East Malaysia. The subjects of the study were language lecturers who were teaching the English course in these polytechnics. There were altogether 113 respondents in the study. Based on the findings, more than 75% of the lecturers agree that the module is useful as a resource book for both students and lecturers and very helpful in providing guidance and support for new and inexperienced lecturers.

Key Words:
Module, Active Learning, Teaching English
1.0 INTRODUCTION
Giddens defines globalization as the ‘intensification of worldwide social
relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings
are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’.

(Giddens, 1990: 64)

In the process of globalization, a person needs to learn the English language
to adapt to the changes happening around him. In Malaysian schools, the
English language has been taught as a second language for many years. But
in spite of these efforts, it would seem that, with the exception of certain
institutions, lecturers are unable to make students reach the aims of
learning English at the desired level. There are many reasons for this
situation and one of them is related to lecturers’ overall approach to
language teaching and the methods they employ in classrooms. Thus a
high priority should be given in developing effective learning and teaching
strategies. Students’ own native ability, background, and the match between
the learning and teaching styles determine their level of learning. Thus, in
order to maximize students learning, we have tried in recent years to
improve the effectiveness of our teaching by incorporating a multi-style
approach in our teaching modules. To reach these objectives, certain
elements have been included in a module. These are: input on selected
topics with a special focus on language expressions and grammar,
recommended time allocation for each topic, learning outcomes and
objectives, rubrics on coursework assessment, suggested activities for active
learning which cater to the different needs and preferences of students, as
well as written exercises, tasks and guided assignments which would help
us evaluate the level the students have obtained.

1.1 Definition
With reference to the polytechnics, the module is a book or workbook of
reference made by lecturers in individual polytechnics to fit the unique
needs and interests of their students and aims at the comprehensive
development of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Many of these
modules include directions for students to perform tasks, both as a means
of practicing the learning and to assess student comprehension. The
content, thickness and usage of the module vary from polytechnic to
polytechnic. It is very similar to the textbook which is basically a collection
of the knowledge, concepts, and principles of a selected topic or course;
usually written by one or more teachers, college professors, or education
experts who are authorities in a specific field; which provide us with
supplemental teaching materials, ideas, and activities to use throughout the
academic year. Almost all English textbooks, however, are designed to
teach grammar, reading and writing, with little emphasis on listening and
speaking, let alone activities such as games or role-playing.
1.2 Statement of the Problem
Observations by the General Studies Heads of Department in polytechnics revealed the possibility that some lecturers fully rely on the module to teach. This was not the original intention of having a module. Rather, the module was only meant to be used as a reference guide and for reinforcement activity. Thus this research is carried out to analyse the views and perceptions of English Language lecturers on the use of a teaching module, as well as to reveal the extent to which the respondents actually utilize the module in the classroom, the types of activities and exercises preferred, and whether the respondents really found the need to use a module.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW
The traditional curriculum focused on the lecturer rather than the learner. However, in recent years there has been a paradigm shift which moves the emphasis from teaching to learning and a more student-centred curriculum. We expect our students to know and understand the lecturer’s larger goals and expectations. We also try to cultivate reflective learning by giving our students the opportunity to reflect on the learning process. The focus is now on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments. One of the most difficult tasks of teaching is defining a good plan with appropriate learning outcomes: What should students know, and what should they be able to do at the end of every lesson? To begin with, students need a comprehensive syllabus (Grunert, 1997) outlining the key concepts, ideas, theories, skills, and procedures of the course. In addition, many students lack some of the basic learning tools necessary to accomplish the course goals. Therefore, helping students learn how to learn has become a key component of good course design. Most students need help with the basics; and the best way to help them is to provide some form of scaffolding (Hogan & Pressley, 1997). They give specific cues for how to do things: question guides for reading assignments, rubrics and work samples for papers and oral presentations (Andrade, 2000), formats and guided practice for note-taking, tips and class discussions. Research also shows that students have different preferences and strengths in how they take in, and process, information. These preferences are sometimes referred to as learning styles and are used to describe and help us understand the different ways in which different students learn. Some learners may be very receptive to visual forms of information such as pictures and diagrams, whilst others prefer written and spoken explanations. Some people prefer to learn actively and interactively, whilst others work better on their own. The idea of learning styles usually refers to a preferred way of learning. It implies that each individual has a natural inclination toward learning of some kind and, that if that preference can be identified, teaching and learning experiences can be provided to help that person learn more effectively. It is important that learners are able to make use of all their senses when gathering, processing and recalling information. This is particularly true of
visual and kinesthetic learning. Teachers should be able to vary their approaches when presenting information and contexts for learning, for example, conveying the big picture as well as detailing step-by-step learning where appropriate. In addition to understanding different learning theories, it is also important to take into account that there is no universal way of learning. (Brown and Atkins, 1991) state that, ‘differing students will use different strategies on different tasks.’ They stress the importance of ‘learning-for-understanding’ and ‘learning-for-knowledge’ orientations, with learning being a continuous process of development back and forth between the two. Seeking to incorporate the above to a learning module can offer a greater likelihood of fostering a deep approach to learning; leading to sustained interaction with content and the others, ability to relate new ideas to previous knowledge; provide explicit explanations & a clear knowledge base to students; structure in a reasonable student workload; provide opportunities for students to pursue topics in depth through self-learning; and ensure an appropriate formative & summative assessment strategy.

Constructive alignment is another approach to curriculum design that maximises the conditions for quality learning by ensuring alignment throughout the process, from the forming of learning outcomes, to the choice of teaching methods to assessment. (Biggs, 1999)

There are three elements involved in the process of constructively aligning your module:
- Defining the learning outcomes;
- Choosing the learning and teaching methods that can lead to the attainment of outcomes;
- Assessing student learning outcomes.

Recent development have encouraged a move to an outcome based approach to course design with learning being defined in terms of what the students can do at the end of a course or programme. The use of learning outcomes is a means of describing the contents of a course in terms of the learning that is intended to happen. A learning outcome is a statement of what the learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning. Learning outcomes focus on learning rather than teaching and are not about what the teacher can provide but what the learner can demonstrate at the end of a module or course. By using teaching modules, the emphasis in the learning process changes to what the learner can demonstrate he has learned rather then what the teacher can tell us he has taught (Gronland, 1970). They can support students to better understand what they can expect to know and be able to do at the end of a module.
2.1 Evolution of Modules
A group of lecturers in Texas began experimenting with mediated instruction combined with behavioral objectives and intra-class groupings in the late 1960s (Creswell & Robinson, 1970). These educators called their instructional vehicles learning modules (Clifford, 1970). The learning modules used contained mediated instructional techniques, texts, and reference materials, demonstrations and group activities. Visual aids, small groups, and a system of feedbacks were used. Modules were designed both for individuals and for small groups. They began with behavioral objectives and included concrete learning aids. The technique was highly flexible. Significant gains in student and teacher achievement occurred in Mathematics and in interpersonal skills (Crittenden and Creswell, 1972).

In 1996, University of Saint Thomas chemistry professor Betsy Longley got interested in using modules to teach better. She first experimented, using modules in a limited way the following year. In 1997, Betsy decided to completely “modularize” an introductory course (Chem 101) that she alone was teaching. Based on that experience, she persuaded her department colleagues to permit the use of modules in the three “regular” sections of Chem 111, a multi-section course that starts the curriculum sequence for chemistry majors. Data collected in 1998 from the module-based sections indicated that students performed as well on end-of-semester exams as those who took non-module sections in previous years. Despite mixed reactions to modules from both instructors and students, the module-based sections reported other salutary outcomes, including (on average) greater student enthusiasm, less absenteeism, and greater retention of content knowledge in subsequent, advanced courses (Connolly, 2002).

2.2 Preparing and Using the Module

| Start of Semester | • In accordance to procedure, the modules are distributed  
|                  | • detailed course syllabus containing the break of topics to be covered explained, objectives & learning outcomes specified |
| Input and Practice | • Instructor delivers lectures students complete the missing verbal and visual elements, exercises and tasks with the help and guidance of the instructor |
| Consolidation & Assessment | • Emphasis is on Active Learning - pairwork, group work, roleplay and class discussion  
|                           | • Assessment on Learning Outcomes |
The visual elements mostly consist of diagrams, graphs and charts, flow charts, tables and pictures. The verbal elements include input on language expressions and functions, language items, grammar and tenses. Visual and verbal elements support each other in a categorized way, and hence, stimulate easy understanding. However, some of the verbal and visual elements are deliberately left incomplete or missing, so that instructor and students have to complete them jointly during lecturing to create effective course notes. The module also identifies examples, tasks and exercises and allocates spaces for them. Students and instructor discuss these tasks and exercises to relate input to application. Hence, the note taking becomes systematic and organized, and the time taken to teach the topic is reduced considerably, since the crucial visual and verbal elements are already provided. Teaching with all these elements available to instructor and students leads to effective teaching and learning. The time saved for having a table or chart in the right time and location can be channeled to critical thinking, asking questions, and in-class group work. Using a module to teach also provides the students with objectives, visual elements, language input, and exercises in a categorized way. Both instructor and students can collaborate actively during the lecturing as they complete the missing or incomplete visual and verbal elements, and discuss tasks and applications. The module also provides students with organized course notes, hence leaving more time for critical thinking and interactions with the instructor. Last but not least, the module provides easy access to input on language expression, grammar and tenses, texts and examples, leading to effective review of the course material and learning outcomes.

3.0 METHODOLOGY
This action research is based on a quantitative research study where questionnaires with open and closed ended questions were distributed to 113 respondents. Apart from that, 6 randomly picked respondents were also interviewed to get more detailed responses on their views towards the use and relevance of the module in the learning and teaching of the English Language in polytechnics.

The underlying objectives of the study were:
- to find out whether the use of teaching modules was prevalent among the English Language lecturers in polytechnics, and
- whether this prevalence had any impact on the way the lecturers conduct their classes.

3.1 Limitations of Study
This study was limited to the perception of 113 lecturers from 9 polytechnics, and covers only 3 out of 5 zones; namely, the Southern and
Eastern zones as well as Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia. The findings do not represent the views of all lecturers from the 32 polytechnics in Malaysia; they are merely a sample of responses. The findings also do not apply to all age groups, as the majority of the respondents are young lecturers with less than 10 years of teaching experience. The findings do not differentiate between the younger and more experienced lecturers.

3.2 Participants
The respondents chosen were a total of 113 language lecturers who were participants in a curriculum roadshow workshop. The distribution of the respondents was as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name of polytechnic</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ibrahim Sultan</td>
<td>Johor</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>Kuala Terengganu</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Kuching</td>
<td>Sarawak</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin</td>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Melaka</td>
<td>Melaka</td>
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<td>Kota Bahru</td>
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<tr>
<td>Port Dickson</td>
<td>Seremban</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah</td>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>17</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Instrument

a. A questionnaire which was divided into two sections:
   Section 1: The respondents were asked to complete 5 items related to their personal details; specifically the name of the polytechnic, gender, age, and years of teaching experience.
   Section 2: The respondents were required to answer 8 open and closed ended questions which were related to how, when and in what way they make use of modules, the advantages and disadvantages of having a module, what kind of materials should be included in a module, whether the module should be standardized for all the polytechnics and should students be forced to buy them.

b. Interviews
   Six randomly selected respondents from six different polytechnics were also interviewed separately to get a more detailed assessment of their ideas, views and perception towards the use of modules in the teaching and learning of English.
4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The respondents consist of 113 lecturers from 9 polytechnics within the age group of 20-55 years. The respondents chosen were English lecturers who were participants in a curriculum roadshow workshop. Majority of the lecturers or 71.3% are from the age group ranging from 23-35 years old and 50% of the respondents are young lecturers with 1-5 years of teaching experience, while 20% have had 6-10 years of experience. Hence, we can also say that the majority of the respondents are young lecturers with less than 10 years of experience.

How prevalent is the use of learning modules? This section explores the results to the question above. The findings show that all or 100% of the respondents make use of the module at some point or other, with 71.3% stating that they use the module in almost every lesson and 28.7% concede to using the module in some of their lessons. When asked about the frequency of use within a lesson, it was found that 69.1% of the respondents use the modules only during certain parts of their lesson. Specifically, 5.3% state that they use the module only at the beginning of the lesson while 3.2% use it at the end of the lesson. The outcome-based approach in learning and teaching does not encourage the use of a module throughout a lesson. In the outcome-based approach, teaching should be more student-centred rather than teacher-centred, and learning should be reinforced with all kinds of group-work activities such as games, role-playing and discussion. These activities aim to recreate real-life situations and give students the opportunity to demonstrate and practise communicative activities with each other. This is true to what Gronland (1970) has already reiterated in his research, that the emphasis is on what a student is able to demonstrate rather than what a lecturer says he has taught. In order to achieve the desired learning outcomes, a lecturer should in advance give a thoughtful consideration to the particular needs and ability of their students, and what learning styles and teaching methods to employ. Accordingly, a lot of the lecturers’ work is transferred to the preparation work before class. During the teaching in the classroom, the focus is to organize, inspire, encourage and help students to participate in learning activities, which is also the competency requirement of outcome-based education. In this aspect, having a teaching module will definitely help the lecturer as the content, objectives and skills required are clearly outlined. However, its use should be restricted to only specific parts of the lesson; such as an introduction to the lesson or as a form of consolidation to what has been taught. Hence, from the findings, it can at first, be concluded that only a small percentage i.e. 5.3% and 3.2% of the lecturers were using the modules as recommended. However, since 69.1% of the lecturers also stated that they use modules only during certain parts of their lesson, which could include the input and/or consolidation parts as well, the overall frequency of use is still appropriate and acceptable in the context of an outcome-based approach. Nevertheless, as 24.5% of the lecturers
surveyed admitted to using the module throughout the lesson; it cannot be denied that a small percentage of the polytechnic lecturers could indeed be relying too much on the use of the module to teach.

**Should they be a standardised module for English in the polytechnics and should students be forced to buy the module?** It was found that only 56.4% of the respondents agreed to the suggestion of having a standardised module. This means that 43.6% of the respondents disagreed. The disagreement could be due to two major reasons; the varied range of programmes offered throughout the 32 polytechnics and the fact that the materials used cater to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As a result, one standardised module for more than 65 programmes would be inappropriate as the needs of the students would be different. Moreover, the level of proficiency, interest and learning styles of the students would also vary. *Brown and Atkins (1991)* recommend that instructors should provide varied opportunities for students to pursue topics in depth through self-learning. Thus more diverse teaching methods as well as attractive instruction media should be employed in order to encourage students to be more active and autonomous in their English Language learning; bearing in mind their differing learning styles, interests, aptitudes, and differences. A variety of teaching methodology will assist lecturers in setting a learning environment which would be conducive for students to learn the language at all times and place. Besides that, varying activities and making the learning experience meaningful for students will increase the effectiveness of the learning process. Perhaps it is for these reasons too, that only 59.6% of the respondents felt that students should be forced to buy the module. Possibly the other 40.4% of them felt that the module could not be fully utilized due to unsuitable or unrelated content or maybe, they just prefer to have the freedom of adapting their own materials to suit the level of their students and type of programme. Some of the respondents who were interviewed however, conceded to the fact that a standardized module could be an option as it is really up to individual lecturers to extract suitable and specific parts of the module which are appropriate to the needs of their students in their learning and teaching. Moreover, there are many other authentic materials that can be used apart from those in the module. For example, lecturers can easily incorporate suitable newspaper cuttings and extracts from books, magazines, brochures or even leaflets as part of their teaching tools in their classroom activities thus ensuring that the needs of their students are fully satisfied.

**What use do the respondents make of the module and what information or materials do they appreciate most?** The respondents unanimously stated that they make use of the module at some point or other in their lessons. Accordingly, a large number, or 70.2% of the respondents, found the module useful as a reference and input guide for language expressions, grammar structures and facts. 58.5% of the
respondents found the written exercises and articles in the module helpful for reading and reinforcement activities. Between 48.9% and 53.2% found that the inclusion of stimuli such as pictures, activities, topics and situations for discussions in the module, helps to lighten their workload and also saves them time by eliminating the need to search for materials to be used in class. Subsequently, when asked about the kind of information and materials that should be included in a module, the answers given matched the respondents’ use of the modules. Accordingly, 70.2% of the respondents stated grammar, notes and facts, 67% stated websites and references for self-learning, 63.8% mentioned topics for discussions and less than half or 50% stated their preference for reading articles as well as reading and writing exercises.

**What are the advantages and disadvantages of using modules in teaching and learning?** As 100% of respondents stated that they make use of the module at some point in the teaching and learning process, they were then first asked what they considered as advantages of using the module. 78.7% and 76.6% respectively said that the module help provide the new lecturers (1-5 years) with materials that are spelled out in detail and it also functions as a resource book for both lecturers and students. 41.5% feel that the module also provides a balanced, chronological presentation of the content and information. Only 56.4% agreed that the module provides all the activities and exercises needed in the teaching and learning process while 53.2 % considered the module as a very helpful teaching tool. Interestingly, only half the respondents believe that the module provides uniformity in relation to the contents to be taught especially within an institution. Since this is the case in point, it should be noted that perhaps the respondents themselves are not fully aware of the importance of ensuring a similar understanding of the curriculum and language structures to be taught across the various programmes. Perhaps this could be expounded by the fact that 44.7% of the respondents felt that the module should only serve as a guide for the lecturers and the rest is perhaps open to their own interpretation. Only a small number or 24.5% of the respondents felt that using the module actually saves time in terms of planning and preparation before class. As for the disadvantages to using modules, 86.2% of the respondents felt that some of the lecturers end up being too reliant on the modules. Similarly, 67% also said students may become too dependent on the module and see it as the only source of information while 63.8% felt that the material in the module might prove unsuitable to the needs of their students and thus make lessons boring and irrelevant. 62.8% of the respondents also feel that the module does not cater to the different learning styles and needs of the students. In addition, 58.5% said the reliance on modules limits the creativity of lecturers while about 50% felt that the content and materials in the module are out dated, or of an inappropriate level to the students from the various programmes. 43.6% of the respondents disagreed with the content in the module. Only a
small percentage or 21.3% of the respondents, however, claim that it is not outcome-based in relation to Communicative English.

5.0 CONCLUSION
The respondents unanimously agree that there are both advantages as well as disadvantages to using the module. Currently all of the respondents do use the module, but the frequency and purpose vary from one person to another. About half the respondents feel that it is unnecessary to have a standardised module for all programmes to enable authentic materials to be used to cater to the different needs and levels of learners. The onus is on the lecturers themselves to source for and adapt appropriate materials to suit their students and the programme. This will eliminate most of the disadvantages discussed and perhaps make it worthwhile for the students to purchase the modules to enable easy reference in the classroom during the teaching and learning process. Although it is felt that the module is useful as a guide for the new lecturers and could very well function as a resource book; some lecturers may end up being overly dependent on it. Hence, the findings present mixed evidence regarding whether using modules in the learning and teaching of English in Polytechnics is more, or less effective than traditional methods. However, from the findings, it can be surmised that the respondents support the use of the module as an important tool in the teaching and learning of English in polytechnics as it can guide students to better understand what they can expect to know and be able to do at the end of the learning process. Training and experience have equipped the lecturer to know the needs of their students, and thus lecturers can and should, create teaching modules to fit the specific needs of their students. Furthermore, helping young people to identify the ways that they learn best and providing them with opportunities to use all their senses and different intelligences is one of the key challenges for instructors and teachers alike.

6.0 REFERENCES:


APPENDICES

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TABLE 9

ADVANTAGES OF USING MODULES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Helpful for new lecturers as the materials are spelled out in detail
- Provides a balanced, chronological presentation of informations
- Resource for teachers and students
- Provides all the activities and exercises needed
- Ensure uniformity in relation to the contents to be taught
- Most helpful tool
- Serves as a guide to the lecturers
- Saves time

TABLE 10

DISADVANTAGES OF USING MODULES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Some lecturers may really fully on the modules
- Does not cater for students with different learning styles and needs
- Limits the creativity of lecturers
- Not outcome based in relation to communicative English
- Old fashioned and may be outdated
- Teaching and learning become boring
- May not be appropriate level for some students
- Students may see the modules as the only source of information
- Disagree with content