

Language Learning Courseware: An Integrated Language Learning Strategy Using Military History

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Abstract. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a work in progress on developing and designing language learning courseware using Military History as the content. This courseware is particularly significant to military cadets at the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM), who are in dire need of ‘realistic’ language learning materials that can assist them to polish their English language proficiency. As this is a work in progress, only preliminary and raw findings can be presented including the data from interviews with war veterans and historians. Developing and designing this courseware are timely because after five years of existence, the NDUM is ready to embark on a serious venture to diversify its learning and teaching environment.

Keywords: language courseware, military history, defence university.

1. Introduction

The use of technology in the teaching and learning process is not only increasing but also relevant for higher learning education. This is because technology allows various learning options for students to assume *more* responsibility in their learning process. Further, students who enter the higher learning institutions today are considered the Digital Natives [1]; they are motivated by information communication technologies (ICTs), and thus respond better in a learning environment that includes the use of digital technologies. Following the success of utilising technology in teaching and learning at other higher learning institutions in Malaysia, the youngest public university, the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM) is also encouraged to adopt technology especially e-learning to assist students’ process of learning. This demand is further enhanced by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia that supports the use of technology to improve teaching and learning. The Ministerial supports come in two ways; firstly, the inception of the National Higher Education Strategic Planning, which comprises e-learning as one of its Critical Agenda Projects and secondly, the launch of National e-Learning Policy in April 2011.

Consequently, the NDUM must take necessary measures to provide students with the best learning environment. Although the defence university is still young, it does not stop the top leadership from planning and later on implementing critical aspects to strengthen tertiary experience for the students. One of the tools of e-learning is the use of web-based or stand-alone courseware. There are abundance of free online materials and courseware. Nonetheless, they are found to be inappropriate for the students of a defence university who require different exposures and content. This research will develop the first language learning courseware for the NDUM students. This courseware will use Military History as the platform for language learning instruction. The use of Military History will allow students to experience and explore the history of military institutions especially the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) and at the same time improve their proficiency in English language.

This brief report has five sections including this introduction. The next section presents the objectives and research questions of this research. Then, selected literature will be reviewed, particularly on learning

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theories and the use of digital technologies. The fourth section describes the methodology adopted in completing this research. Lastly, preliminary findings and conclusions close the discussion of this brief report.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

This work in progress has three objectives described below,

- To build English language learning courseware for the NDUM students;
- To expose students to the military history of Malaysia in particular and the world in general; and
- To introduce students and encourage them to use digital technologies in their learning process

The research does not have a hypothesis since the end product will be the language learning courseware.

However, there are five main research questions that need to be addressed,

- What are the pedagogical concerns about designing and developing language learning courseware?;
- What are the best learning theories to be adopted in this language learning courseware?;
- How does technology facilitate language learning?;
- How does language learning facilitate the understanding of military history?; and
- What are the characteristics of good language learning courseware?

3. Selected Literature

This section examines two vital aspects, namely the relevant learning theories for developing and designing language courseware and the benefits of digital technologies. First, this study will focus on only two learning theories, behaviourism and constructivism as these two are the most appropriate theories to base the development of courseware. The behaviourist school of thought was first articulated by Thorndike [2], Pavlov [3], Watson [4] and Skinner [5]. All these scholars believed in the presupposition that similar to animals, human beings were creatures whose behaviour could be conditioned by repetitive learning exercises in which certain types of ‘desirable’ acts were rewarded and other, ‘undesirable’ acts, were not ‘reinforced.’ Taking these ideas into human learning, behaviourist educators insisted that students learnt better when they were “drill[ed] and [forced to] practice” [6]. The act of ‘learning’ was itself defined as something that took place when there was a change in the behaviour of the subject – a change in a manner compliant with the requirements of the instructor [7]. In fact, the first courseware called CAI or Computer Assisted Instruction, which was designed and introduced in the 1970s [8] applied drill-and-practice techniques to condition students’ learning.

The constructivist approach to teaching and learning was based on a combination of a subset of research within cognitive psychology and a subset of research within social psychology. The basic premise was that an individual student must actively ‘build’ or ‘construct’ knowledge and skills and that information existed within these built constructs rather than in the external environment. e-Learning has always been associated with constructivism. This relationship was perhaps due to the fact that technology provided students with almost unlimited access to information that they needed in order to do research and test their ideas [9]. Technology also facilitated communication as it allowed students to present their views and products to broader audiences and also exposed them to the opinions of a more diverse group of people in the real world beyond the classroom, school and local community – all these conditions were optimal for constructivist learning. A principle in constructivism was to provide a context for the student in order to teach him or her concepts of wholes. The context should place the student in a situation similar to the one in which he or she was going to apply the knowledge where understanding was much more important than memorising facts.

Over time, constructivism has evolved into many branches, responding to diverse fields of studies. There developed at least two important variations of constructivism – cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. Piaget [10][11] and Bruner [12] were considered the chief theorists among cognitive constructivists, while Vygotsky [13] was the major theorist of the social constructivists. It is crucial to recognise that the branches of constructivism are not competitive; rather they are complementary. This is an important insight for the purposes of the present research. Cognitive constructivism helped instructors to understand why students learnt at differing speeds and how to tackle this. Social constructivism helped instructors to prioritise the importance of guiding students in a socially constructed environment in which the

student was not alone but rather part of a wider body of thinking people engaged in a common curriculum of learning. Cognitive constructivism stressed the value of individual experience and the need to connect to one's prior knowledge. Social constructivism stressed that learning could not exist without the guidance of instructors or 'more able' peers. Though students must exercise agency and independence to learn, their surroundings gave important support in the process of learning. Taken together, cognitive and social constructive learning theory might be able to offer a new paradigm into which scholars can locate the potential of educational technologies.

Although the constructivist approach to learning appears more suited for developing and designing language courseware (as will be discussed later), the behaviourist approach to learning is critical to ensure mastery of specific skills. The researcher opines that for foundation aspects of a learning object, the application of behaviourist principles will be more apt. As the curricula progress from easy to difficult task fulfilment, the behaviourist principles will be blended with the constructivist principles, and eventually the constructivist approach to learning will play a more essential role in helping students acquire the target language.

Second, in much of the literature it has been suggested that e-learning technologies help students to understand and learn better. Although these benefits are not unique to military learning environments, they are particularly pertinent to the training of military leadership. The benefits [14][15] include facilitating students' construction of knowledge, testing their ideas, actively sharing and seeking information, generating a diverse array of ideas, appreciating multiple perspectives, engaging in social and intellectual interaction and dialogue, engaging in critical thinking and problem solving exercises, increasing participation and reflection (self-directed learning), developing multiple modes of representation and becoming more self-aware; facilitating students' engagement in a meaningful learning context, and thus increasing the ownership over their own learning; helping students to learn more effectively at their own pace and in their own way; helping students to select, store and retrieve information efficiently; preparing students for real-life situations as students have an opportunity to explore many possibilities using authentic materials; helping instructors/lecturers maintain content relevance by providing ready access for updating, adding and deleting materials; and helping institutions cut the costs of logistics and travel when the need for training arises.

4. Methodology

Because the final product of this research is the production of language learning courseware, the methods adopted to complete this research is unique to this research only. The researcher has identified the software to be used for developing and designing the courseware, followed by determining the respondents of the interviews. The researcher also seeks assistance from the Ministry of Defence, Malaysia to nominate names of war veterans and historians, who can share their experiences in wars or peacekeeping operations involving the MAF. The interviews planned are semi-structured in nature, taking into account the age of the respondents who are mostly above 65 years old. In honour of their contributions to the country, the courseware will acknowledge their names as the sources of information. After all interviews are complete, data will be arranged based on themes and story boarding will begin based on these themes and the English language curricula at the defence university.

5. Preliminary Findings and Conclusion

The preliminary findings suggest that the development of the language courseware requires a concerted effort of the researcher in understanding the content and translating the content to language learning materials. Being a language instructor, the researcher must prepare herself to the task of digesting important facts and figures on the history of MAF and associated events. The emerging themes based on the four interviews conducted include nation building, *esprit de corps*, military professionalism and armed conflicts. Preliminary story boards too have been identified based on these themes. It must be emphasised that these boards must match the existing English curricula at the defence university. The English language courses at the NDUM provide students with three basic components: generic, military-based content and major-based content (of the students).

In general, the use of behaviourist approach to learning will be more suitable for grammar and vocabulary lessons, which will appear as the first component of the courseware. The subsequent components will be a blended of both approaches and later moving more towards constructivist principles of learning.

To conclude, this is the first attempt in Malaysia to prepare language learning courseware that combines English language and military components. Although this work might not be commercially available to the general public, its contributions to the defence university and all the single service training colleges in the armed forces are huge. Ultimately, this courseware can also be shared and used in the students' military classes especially their Military History class; not only is the courseware locally produced, the contents are also authentic based on first hand insights of Malaysian war veterans and historians.

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