

EET Speaking Test Performance: Catering to the Test-Takers' Needs via Web-based Instruction

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Abstract

Technology-enhanced language learning includes utilising the internet technology in vast ways. A web-based instructional (WBI) tool following a theoretical-and-pedagogical framework namely WeCSI was developed to assist students in their preparation for the speaking component of English Exit Test (EET). WeCSI, an acronym that stands for Web-based Cognitive Speaking Instruction, is a modified version of an award-winning e-framework called Web-based Cognitive Writing Instruction (WeCWI). It focuses on the processes of watching, discussion, and speaking through a digital platform to foster interactions among learners, learners to the instructor, and learners to contents. To measure the feedback from the users for this innovation and to access the acceptance level in using blogs and learning management system (LMS) for learning EET speaking component among students, an adapted unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) survey formulated by Venkatesh was applied. The sample was selected by using the purposive sampling method. The data were analysed via the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25. The findings suggest that there is a fervent need for the test-takers to use such facility in preparing them for their speaking test as well as honing their speaking skills. In conclusion, if the test-takers can optimise and maximise their potentials via the use of this WBI tool, they can obtain a better grade in their EET speaking component.

Keywords: *WBI, EET; CEFR; WeCSI; UTAUT; speaking tasks*

Introduction

Background

EET is an English language competency-based test introduced by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in its effort to help its graduates' marketability in terms of communication skills. This has been one of the criteria sought after hiring managements and companies according to the surveys conducted worldwide. In gauging the graduates' language competence and proficiency, this test offers them two specific skills on speaking and writing. The test is offered in their final semester before graduating. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), they are graded accordingly as A1 and A2 as basic users, B1 and B2 as independent users, and C1 and C2 as proficient users.

To prepare the graduates to be more marketable based on their language proficiency and competence (Hal Ehwal Akademik UiTM Shah Alam, 2016), the implementation of EET is very much in tandem with the aspirations of the Graduate Employability blueprint as propagated by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Workplace readiness complemented by effective communication skills in English as required by the potential employers as reported in the reports filed by the MEF is also one of the justifications to the necessity in preparing the graduates to be competent and marketable ("MEF_Lack of soft skills among issues we hope to address and change," 2015). The EET is very much aligned to CEFR that focuses on a range of competences—both general and in particular the communicative language competences—engaged in thematic language activities (Council of Europe, 2001).

E-learning, virtual class, digital contents, knowledge management, and web-based learning are some familiar terms that have been coined with the breakthrough of information and communication technology (ICT) in relation to pedagogy.

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Moreover, it is of importance to acknowledge the role of instructors, which have shifted from traditional to a more progressive and proactive manner to facilitate the students' learning process and outcomes. They are no longer just disseminating pertinent knowledge as the norm has it, but the volatile change in technology has pushed them to embrace technology more aggressively. In short, the role of instructors has undergone many positive alterations in the current century, which can be attributed to many influential factors for their use of technology.

Problem Statement

Online learning is inevitable in a world filled with technology-enabler tools aiming to make the experience more beneficial to both learners and instructors. The availability of internet and web-based instructions apart from the platforms have resulted in different modes of learning to take place. Despite the presence of technology-enabler tools, poor speaking skills among graduates remains unsolved. No studies are found conducted on the oral assessment and workplace readiness or occupational purposes.

The lack of physical classes and practices for these undergraduates to assist and prepare them for the EET has spurred an effort to create the opportunity to pursue some knowledge with regards to the test. Due to their time constraints, students' packed schedule, and the course requirements that have hindered any common course for EET699 in the university, an initiative of utilising technology-enabled tools was taken for these learners to be given the exposure and enough practice for them to sit for the test.

I-Learn portal of UiTM is an LMS launched on 30th December 2005 with the purpose of making UiTM a premier university of outstanding scholars and academic excellence through e-learning. A study conducted by Mariam Setapa, Khairunnisa Rahman, & Noorita Mohammad, (2012) on the effect of using i-Learn on student performance at a local university. They highlighted some problems faced by the students in having the i-Learn system fully utilised. One of the issues is the low frequency in using the system since most lecturers did not find the system to be of assistance. The lecturers complained that the time taken to access the page due to the busy server have been probable justifications to the ineffective use of the i-Learn.

Research Objectives

The absence of physical classes and the constraint in having a common lecture requiring students to attend and prepare them for the English Exit Test has prompted an initiative to provide these learners some input via the WBI and the existing LMS. The scope of this innovation is aligned closely to CEFR proposed to the EET test-takers in UiTM Penang Branch initially. A scheme of work consisting of seven weeks of lessons has been prepared for the learners who have registered EET699 in UiTM Penang Branch based on the syllabus provided by Hal Ehwal Akademik UiTM Shah Alam, (2016). This has enabled them to be given sufficient input and exposure to the EET.

A WBI tool to assist students in their preparation for the speaking component of EET was developed to be used for the conduct of EET Speaking Training session. This digital platform was designed following a theoretical-and-pedagogical framework namely WeCSI, which is a modified version of WeCWI that focuses on the processes of watching, discussion, and speaking to foster interactions among learners, learners to the instructor, and learners to contents. The objective of this study is to examine the learners' who have attended EET699 trainings via LMS (i-Learn) and WBI (blog) to assess the perceptions on their preference between the two e-learning modes.

Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, the research seeks the answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the students' most preferred Web 2.0 platform for the EET Speaking Training?
2. What is the preferred web host for an instructional blog?
3. Is i-Learn another preferred platform for the EET Speaking Training?
4. What are the preferred sections in EET WBI (blog) to enhance speaking performance?

Literature Review

Web-Based Instruction (WBI)

E-learning and blended learning are synonymous with a more personalised learning for the learners. Mah, Suzana Ab. Rahim, Liaw, & Marimuthu (2019) and (Mah, 2021) note that in the digital era, a mode that has taken the educational or

instructional worlds by storm is WBI. This is especially true where knowledge concerned with ELT has been widely manipulated, created, and integrated into web-based activities by many educators and instructors particularly in HEIs (Higher Education Institutions). To exemplify the use of blog as an e-learning platform for WBI, WeCWI can be used as a framework for educators to develop their own platform for online teaching. In fact, a blog is a versatile web 2.0 platform that has lots of potential for English language teaching (ELT).

A WBI is usually developed independently by an instructor via a web 2.0 application for instructional purpose. A WBI tool is proposed to be created by following a framework namely WeCSI, a modified version of an award-winning e-framework called WeCWI, focusses on the processes of watching, discussion, and speaking to foster interactions among learners, learners to instructor, and learners to contents. This WBI tool is exclusively meant for all UiTM students sitting for their EET. Giving room for the instructor to innovate rather than to use the existing technological tool by creating an online learning environment at one's own pace, this technology enabler tool is also like of others in the market whereby it is a free and open-source software incorporating a variety of user-friendly functions. Upon one's observation of the proposed blog, the related web resources could easily be integrated based on the course or programme in the forms of web widgets or hypertexts.

Independently developed with the instructional purpose in mind, a WBI can easily be created by an instructor via a web 2.0 application. The instructor has the freedom to explore and create an online environment much suited to the needs of the clients and oneself at his or her own pace. There are also some featured uniqueness of WBI on EET Speaking Training, which include the training ground using an online instructional tool to supplement EET training. Mobility features in using their handphone, phablet, tablet and laptop to utilise the simulations. Equipped with a pedagogy emphasis to watch, speak, and discuss selected videos and training of authentic-like situations, learners are encouraged to follow a schedule suggested to help them prepare for the EET. Moreover, the availability of widgets including live chat, online dictionary, and many more in Enrichment tab are treated as supportive features for EET speaking.

Nadzrah Abu Bakar, Hafizah Latif and Azizah Ya'acob (2010) and Nadzrah Abu Bakar (2009) conducted studies on blogging and how the interactions transpired in the e-learning environment have affected the undergraduates' English language learning and language literacy. Due to the inhibitions, they face in a less interesting and interactive learning environment as cited in Nadzrah (2009), Lightbown and Spana (1999) emphasise that the less proficient students have identified or related to learning English language as an arduous task. To encourage the students' active participation and stimulate their further interest in mastering the speaking skills, there should be certain measures taken up.

Lin & Hsieh (2001) believe that such incidences will thus spur the learners with experiential learning important to initiate or stimulate further thoughts and insights via the web-based instructions. More importantly, we need to acknowledge the present instances of Web 2.0 ranging from blogs (Blogger, Edublogs, MySpace, and WordPress), podcasts, wikis, Wix.com and social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter paving the appearance for the WBI adoption by educators in their teaching. In addition, web 3.0, web 4.0, and mobile technologies that have come into play aggressively suggesting that the existing LMS system to be upgraded.

For WBI, web 2.0 applications are adopted by the instructors in their teaching of language. Voice blog is an example of WBI utilised as a platform for an extensive study on some selected language learners' speaking skills. A study conducted by Sun (2009, p.88) has found that "blogs can constitute a dynamic forum that fosters extensive practice, learning motivation, authorship, and development of learning strategies.". For further research, Sun (2009) argues if speaking to an audience face-to-face (F2F) and on a blog would trigger a similar anxiety level. In addition, Sun contends on the effects of voice blogs and whether they would have developed an equal sense of audience presence when they voice-blogged in comparison to being F2F. He also suggests that more research should be done on blogging with other forms of CMC to help enhance pedagogical methods for various instructional aims (Sun, 2009).

Nevertheless, it goes without saying that anything in excessive could have resulted in certain drawbacks. If WBI is treated as the exclusive mode of e-learning applied in higher education; its acceptance as an effective e-learning practice among all educators who possess different teaching styles or preferences may be questionable. Besides, the maximum utilisation of the WBI among all the educators cannot be ensured. Therefore, it is worth to ponder upon the full adoption of WBI developed via an adaptable web 2.0 platform to be the future e-learning mode for instructional practices. Without the presence of an e-learning policy and the Information Communication Technology (ICT) policy, the effective and efficient adoption of WBI deserve further investigation.

Learning Management System (LMS)

Ahmad Fauzi Mohd Ayub, Rohani Ahmad Tarmizi, Wan Marzuki Wan Jaafar, Wan Zah Wan Ali, & Wong (2010) define LMS as a web-based technology utilised in a learning environment that helps plan, distribute, and evaluate a specific learning process that aims at delivering the learning content and resources to the learners. Besides, Mas Nida Md. Khambari et al., (2010) refers LMS as "a set of tools and a framework that allows the relatively easy creation of online

course content and the subsequent teaching and management of that course including various interactions with students taking the course” as cited in Educause (2003, p.1).

As explained by Mohamed Amin Embi (2011), LMS is an information system that can be divided into two categories, namely proprietary and open source. Blackboard is of proprietary whereas Moodle and i-Learn are of open source. Renowned and vastly used due to its cost-free and modification ability features, LMS is opted for by many Higher Education Providers (HEPs) since it functions in assisting the online courses management up taken by the HEPs. Other examples of LMS are Moodle, i-Folio, Claroline, MyGuru2, Learning Care, iLearn System, Learning Cube, Blackboard, PutraLMS and MyLMS (Nurul Nadirah Mohd Kasim & Fariza Khalid, 2016).

The context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is rather different from that in other subject domains. When an LMS is applied in any language courses, it can be more than a system, space, or platform of course management for language improvement. Any language courses, however, with the LMS application would differ from that of the usual subject domain. It would easily require an LMS that accommodates not only input and output of the character set of the target language, but also some other learning tools such as discussion boards, vocabulary activities, grammar clinics, online dictionaries, and writing draft books, feedback and assessment tools; all are organised around the learning activities and communicative practice in all four language skills (Sawatpanit, Suthers, & Fleming, 2004, as cited in Wichadee, 2015; Srichanyachon, 2014; Ibrahim Abood Almarashdeh, Noraidah Sahari, Nor Azan Mat Zin, & Mutasem Alsmadi, 2010; Khadijah Abdul Rahman, Siti Aswani Mohd Ghazali, & Mohd Nasir Ismail, 2011; Mariam Setapa et al., 2012)

Recommended as an instructional tool in enhancing learning of English language amongst the English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, Talha Abdullah Sharadgah (2013) is of the view that the internet technology is advantageous for both the learners and instructors (Barnes, 2003; Kuo, 2008). Dincer (2012) emphasises the strong positive effects that the internet tools have left the students with; thus, ensuring the prolonged needs or relevance for the internet accessibility. This could easily be extended to the learning of language particularly in speaking skill since it is believed that their speaking proficiency can be further improved through the exposure of internet-based programs which could easily boost or stimulate their interest.

However, LMS also possess certain drawbacks. These include the shortage in the financial budget, software and hardware compatibility and other technical issues amongst others as cited in Fuad A. A. Trayek and Sharifah Sariah Syed Hassan (2013). Similarly, Jowati Juhary (2013a) highlight the result was not enthusiastically accepted by the lecturers after three years of implementation of the LMS who believe that the LMS will make them redundant. Since the lecturers and students are very dependent on the LMS imposed by the university, there are bound to be changes to the system as these must be given due evaluation on whether the existing present practices would then require any improvement. Any unnecessary changes to the LMS support could bring about disruption in the course development dependent on the system. As such, teachers and students alike are then going to bear the consequences (Ahmad, Bawachinade, Gambaki, Ibrahim, & Ala, 2012).

Mas Nida Md. Khambari et al. (2010) sum up some of the learners’ needs and concerns from the LMS having the needs for more flexibility to personalise and customise their personal account or webpage. In addition, their concern includes the lack of a notifier in the form of an email to their assignment submission uploaded to the system. The LMS also would be more a crowd puller for its users if it has attractive layouts and widgets that are embedded onto it. The relevant links related to the course they are enrolled in and the colourful background detailed with graphics and widgets of music player, flash, and games to name a few would not go unnoticed. Another feature that has been cited to be boost is the forum section whereby the learners would prefer if interesting topics could be put there in order for it to initiate more active participation and discussion there (Mas Nida Md. Khambari et al., 2010).

Methodology

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in May 2019 at UiTM Penang Campus, West Malaysia. The sample of the study was obtained using a purposive sampling method where the subjects fit the criteria set by the researchers (Creswell, 2014)—it comprises those who were interested to join EET 699 Speaking Training session through an invitation link sent via WhatsApp message. A total of 48 students had participated in EET Speaking Training session before taking part in a survey.

Research Procedures and Instrument

The students were placed in groups to learn EET 699 independently with the assistance of an instructor. After using the EET Blog for four weeks, an online questionnaire via a Google Form was created and posted online; then, the link was distributed to these students through a WhatsApp message. The questionnaire contains two parts: demographic profile and

12 items of UTAUT questionnaire (Venkatesh, 2012) to assess the students' preference and acceptance of blog usage in the learning of EET 699.

The items in Section A collect the demographic data of the samples including age, gender, and study programme. Section B that consists of 4 items deals with the learners' experience of using the blog. Section C with five items focusses on the performance expectancy. In Section D that has five items, it is made up of behavioural intention items. Meanwhile, Section E has six items on perceived usefulness, while there are six items of perceived ease of use in Section F. The last section deals with preference for the EET Speaking training about the learners' perceptions on their preferred instructional platform for EET Speaking Training together with their views with regards to WBI (blog) and LMS (i-Learn).

The data were collected and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (Version 25) for conducting the descriptive data analysis based on the research questions. The items in the questionnaire were adapted to suit the aim and objectives of the study. Items found in Sections C, D, and E use five Likert scales namely strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree for measuring the perceptions based on the UTAUT (Venkatesh, 2012).

Findings and Discussion

Preferred Web 2.0 Platform for the EET Speaking Training

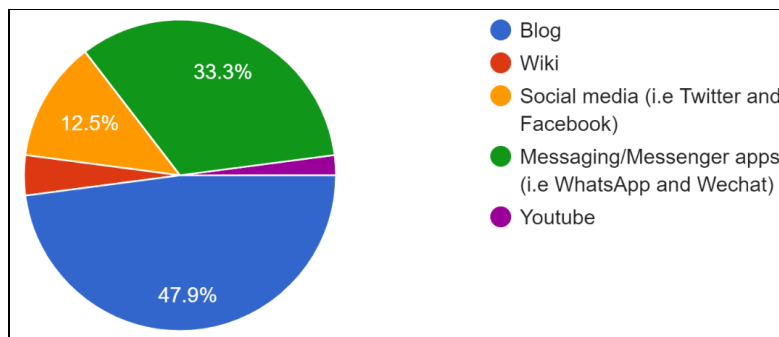


Figure 1: Which one is your most preferred web 2.0 platform for the EET Speaking Training?

With the explosive use of e-learning and the birth to platforms to cater to web technologies, studies have indicated that there exists a certain need to cater to the specific needs of the learners. Based on the pie chart above, most of the respondents as much as 47.9% preferred blog to be used for the EET Speaking training. This is followed by 33.3% who opted Messaging / Messenger apps other than having it via social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook, which are 12.5%.

In fact, most of the time, all existing e-learning platforms cater to common disciplines offered in the Higher Education Providers (HEPs). On the other hand, as advocated by Afendi Hamat, Hazita Azman, Noorizah Mohd Noor, Kesumawati Abu Bakar, & Fariza Mohd Nor, (2014) there is a specific need for language learners to have an e-learning platform that caters to their language skills i.e writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Thus, this has prompted the team to come up with a platform that helps the students in terms of their writing skill.

Preferred Web Host for an Instructional Blog

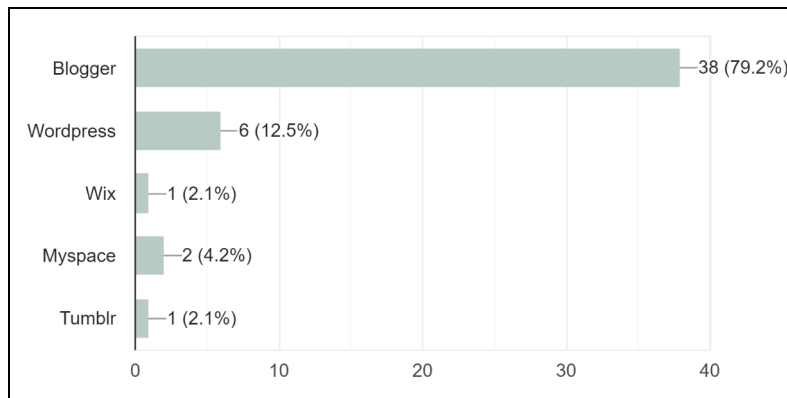


Figure 2: Which one is your most preferred web host for an instructional blog?

A blog which can be self-developed as an instructional tool by the instructor needs the initial process such as setting it up and maintaining it. It requires a lot of time and effort for any instructor who is initiated to play the role of an instructor cum blogger especially when the virtual chat sessions occur involving the instructors and learners (Suzana Ab. Rahim & Mah, 2015). As what can be summarised from the bar graph above, Blogger at 79.2% records as the most preferred web host for an instructional blog as compared to the rest with 12.5% for Wordpress. Wix.com which is relatively new to them only has a score of 2.1%. Blogger offers the high flexibility in interface design for personalised learning, which has attracted many instructors as well as the learners for the needs of their own subjects. Moreover, with such criteria, the learning process will be more appealing and ceases to become dreary and long-winded.

i-Learn as a Preferred Platform Option

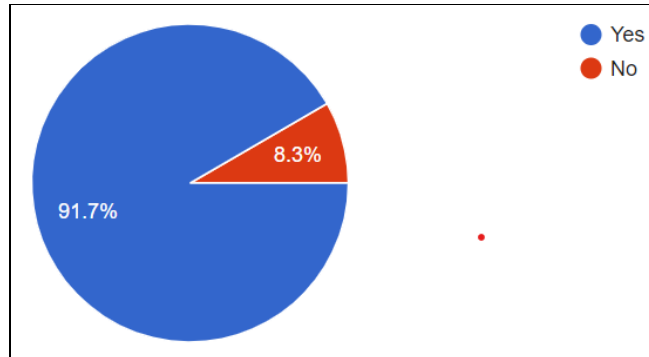


Figure 3: Besides using the preferred platform stated above, do you think i-Learn is another good option?

Ahmad Fauzi Mohd Ayub et al., (2010) in citing the works of Alias and Zainuddin (2005) highlight on the learning management system (LMS) as a mode responsible in aiding “the planning, distribution and evaluation of a specific learning process” (p. 101). UiTM has its own LMS that is known as the i-Learn portal. It was launched on 30th December 2005 with the purpose of making UiTM a premier university of outstanding scholars and academic excellence through e-learning (Mohd Nor Mamat, Jono, Mohd Nor Hajar Hasrol, Azlan Abd aziz, & Nurmaisara Za’ba, 2005). In addition, it provides the learners as well as the lecturers a platform to make the process of teaching and learning easier and more flexible (Nurmaisara Za’ba et al., 2012). To date, UiTM has now upgraded its LMS system to the i-Learn version 3- (a learning management system or LMS developed via PHP).

As for the above table, 93.5 % of the respondents stated their agreement that i-Learn is another good option other than those platforms that they have listed and agreed upon to be of their relevant choices for instructional purposes in learning EET Speaking. Notably, LMS or i-Learn has been the very platform whereby the educators and learners of UiTM alike has been exposed to since it is aimed to cater to the instructional needs beyond the borders of the physical classrooms. In other universities LMS also has been reported as the medium of communication or a student portal relevant for many parties

involved in the organization (Jowati Juhary, 2013; Trayek & Hassan, 2013; Almarashdeh, Sahari, Azan, Zin, & Alsmadi, 2005; Ibrahim Abood Almarashdeh et al., 2010; Khadijah Abdul Rahman et al., 2011).

According to (Wichadee, 2015) the quiz module can easily function as a question database, feedback, scoring and tracking of students' progress. The second tool category in an LMS is communication tools. This category includes the means of interaction enablers amongst the learners and their instructors. Most of the time, it works as announcement board bearing new information related to the course code prerequisites or requirements and its weightage. Another common feature is the discussion board made available to the students which they can post messages to and get replies from their related course instructors.

Preferred Sections in EET WBI (blog) for Boosting Speaking Performance

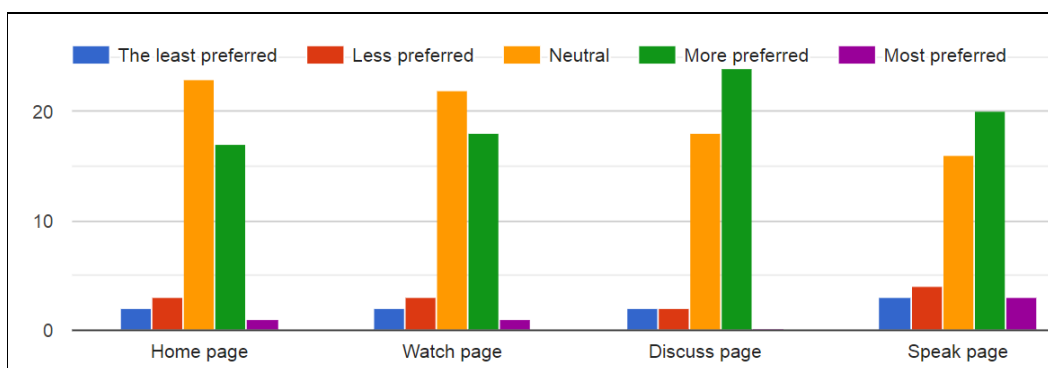


Figure 4a: Please rate your preferred sections found in the EET WBI (blog) to boost your speaking performance.

As for the preferred sections found in the WBI blog to boost their speaking performance, the respondents record that their highly preferred section is in the speak page despite having less than 5 respondents stating so. Indicating their more preferred section amongst the four in the discuss page, more than half of the total number of respondents make up for this. In addition, a similar trend can also be observed in the Speak page section whereby 20 respondents also indicated that they did prefer the section more than they did the rest.

Hansen (2001, as cited in Chen, (2005), contrastively concurs that online interaction in comparison to a traditional face to face class interaction has been found to have benefitted the learners since they are less hesitant to speak up more. This could easily be attributed to the various functions enabled and applicable in the synchronous and asynchronous systems upon the employment of the computer assisted learning (CALL) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in enhancing the process of language teaching and learning (Chen, Liu, & Wong, 2007).

Hence, the portals are believed to minimise students' shyness since there are many who are reluctant when it comes to English language learning. This could be due to the features available via thread discussions, shared files and forums in the portal which emphasizes more on interactivity and thus promoting a more active role in the knowledge acquisition process. As cited in Elango, Gudep, and Selvam, (2008) studies conducted by some educational experts (Mangan,2001; Rosenbaum, 2001; Smith 2001) have found that the online environment is "more interactive in nature than the traditional ones" due to the fact that it caters to the slow learners who actually require "more response time to participate" (p. 33). Thus, they also reiterate their stand on how e-learning with the proper implementation stands to benefit the end users.

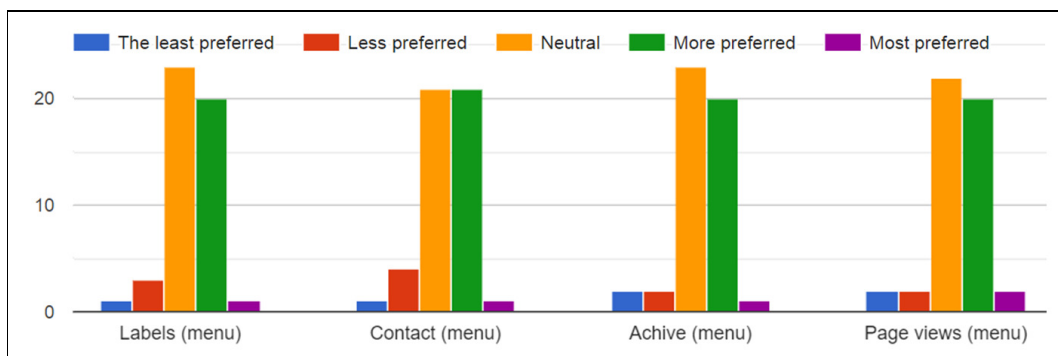


Figure 4b: Please rate your preferred sections found in the EET WBI (blog) to boost your speaking performance.

The above chart depicts the respondents' preference among the four present items on the blog ranging from the labels, contact, archive, and page views. The respondents are quite indifferent towards these sections based on their neutral stands of preference. However, the second highest number of preferences was recorded by their mostly preferred section as all four reached a minimum of 20 respondents for each section.

As the sole purpose of this research is to seek ways on how these learners can be assisted via tech enablers tools to score better in the pursuit of their speaking skills for EET, thus it is only natural that perhaps the interest is retained in these two sections. Moreover, it is also observed that the watch page did not score highly well with the respondents even though the actual input of the lessons are particularly conveyed and disseminated via the YouTube videos which have been selected to provide the learners with the suggested content of the EET.

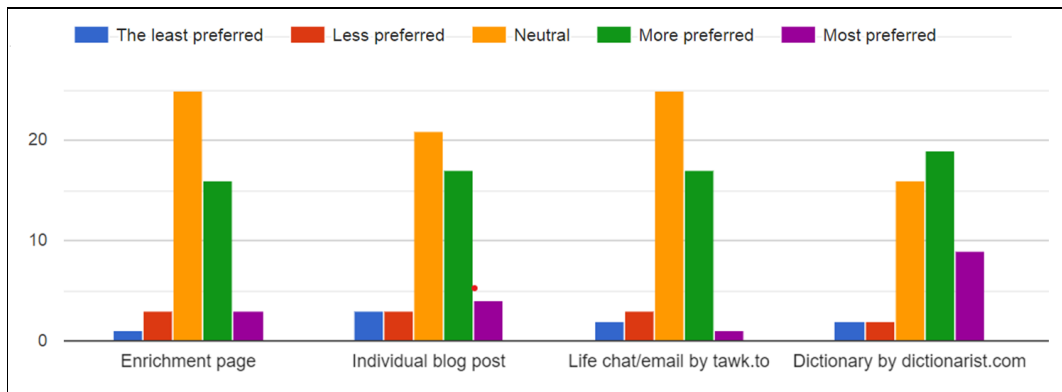


Figure 4c: Please rate your preferred sections found in the EET WBI (blog) to boost your speaking performance.

From the chart above, most respondents seemed to be in the neutral category which could be due to the limited time and exposure to the blog assigned within a short period. Given a longer duration for this short study, it could have illustrated a different picture altogether.

Conclusion

This pilot study is useful to determine the feasibility of the study protocol prior to administering the actual study on a larger scale. This also includes the appropriateness of the treatment and the instruments used for the targeted outcome measure. After conducting the pilot study, all steps and procedures for conducting the actual study will be remained unchanged. However, the subjects of the actual study will undergo a longer duration of intervention. They need to practise more through writing tasks and lessons offered based on the writing modules to achieve a more significant improvement in both the writing performance and critical thinking. Besides, alterations on the treatment should be considered by reducing the number of web widgets on the blog to prevent cognitive overload.

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