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The Roles of Online Placement Test in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The influence of technology in the world today and most especially by students have made it paramount for learning institutions to inculcate technology in the English language teaching curriculum. Could it be that there is a dire need to dive away from the traditional way of chalkboard teaching system to a more interactive whiteboard teaching system? It is worth-noting that constant attraction of students to the internet has made it important for learning institutions to keep abreast with the changes with no exception to context of the study. Thus, on the one hand through literature, this study will review the innovative strategies behind the use of online placement test to determine the course level of students enrolled in English language courses. On the other hand, the study will compare the final examination performance of students to determine the effectiveness of the online placement test. This study intends to address the following research questions: (a) what criteria are used to determine the course level of students before commencing any English language course? (b) Do students prefer the use of online placement test for English course leveling? And (c) how does the English online placement test affect students' overall performances in the course? The study will adopt a triangulation approach which will comprise the use of surveys, in terms of questionnaires and the use of semi-structured interviews. Thus, the study on the roles of online placement test in English language teaching will shed new light on the importance of technology to enhance learning performances especially amongst students who live in a globalised and digitalised age in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Keywords: Online placement test; English language teaching; Bahrain; English for Business; Technology

1. Introduction

The influence of technology in the world today and most especially by students have made it paramount for learning institutions to inculcate technology in the English language teaching curriculum. Due to the age of technological advancements and the dire need to implement multimedia technologies like: Power point, videos, radio, television, Cd Rom, computers, C.A.L.L., the internet, electronic dictionary, email, blogs and audio cassettes, DVDs or VCDs in teaching, cannot be underestimated. Hismanoglu (2012) states that technology plays a vital role in the learning and teaching process as well as

a positive impact on the "characteristics and functioning of education," which promotes thinking skills and strategies. Thus, technology is important in enhancing the quality and education of learning through its accessibility. (Scott & Robinson, 1996). This does not imply that the traditional method of teaching is of no value, but students who are learning English as a second language, find it easier to keep pace and develop confidence through multimedia technology. Thus, teachers can be current with the latest trends and best equipment that can make their classes more interactive, colourful and stimulating (Shyamlee, 2012).

Bahrain, officially known as the Kingdom of Bahrain, a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, is a small island country that nests in the heart of the Arabian Gulf with an estimated population of 1.316 million people in 2014 (Ministry of Information Affairs, 2014). In Bahrain, Arabic is widely spoken as a national and official language, which most people especially Arabs are competent in. Whereas, English is used more prominently in the business world and in formal learning institutions mainly because of its position as a global language.

The paper presented a background study on the roles of technology in English language teaching. Thereafter, the paper discussed the use of online placement tests through empirical studies. Using previous placement test results and final grades to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of online placement tests and survey questionnaires of some students, the researcher identified the criteria used to determine the course level of students before commencing any English language course, the perception of students taking the online placement test, as well as the effect of online English placement test in students' overall course performances.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

It is noteworthy that constant interaction of students to the internet has made it important for learning institutions to keep abreast with the changes with no exception to Bahraini students. This study was intended to address the following research questions: (a) what criteria were used to determine the course level of students before commencing any English language course? (b) Do students support the use of online placement test for English course leveling? And (c) how did the English online placement test affect students' overall performances in the course?

1.2. Analytical Framework

Online Oxford Placement Test (thereafter, OOPT) was used as the analytical framework for the study. OOPT, which is a reliable commercially developed, grades and places students into suitable levels. (See Brown, 1989 and Shahrokni, 2009). In line with Far and Zoghi (2014)'s instrumentation, the suitable level of the students was determined through the use OOPT. OOPT is also used at AMA International University Bahrain. The original test of OOPT has two sections namely; listening and use of English (grammar) tests. However, because of the presence of some limitations and problems related to the administration of the complete form of the test, only the use of English part of the test was selected for analysis, as reading and writing skills were compulsory in the final examination since listening was optional.

1.3. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study comes from the fact there is a paucity of research on online placement test in English language teaching in Bahrain. Thus, the study of some students enrolled in English courses either as prerequisite in foundation courses or international qualifications learning institutions in Bahrain, will shed new light on the importance of technology. Also, to enhance learning performances especially amongst students living in a globalised and digitalised age in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

1.4. Scope and Limitation

The sample population for the study were students enrolled in the English for Business Courses, an international certification course at AMA International Training Institute in Bahrain. In addition, despite the fact that the use of technology in classroom teaching encompasses a broad scope using different social, academic, and institutional contexts, this study focused only on online placement test used by students enrolled in the English course.

2. Literature Review

Leki (1991:53) defined placement test as a test that "pairs a student with an appropriate course." Brown (1989:65), further illustrated placement test as the "first contact that a student encounters when taking up most ESL/EFL programmes because of the

necessity of sorting students into homogenous language-ability groupings, sometimes within specific skill areas". His study highlights the fact that the effectiveness of any credible placement test can differ from one group of student to the other and the English language ability of students differ greatly in terms of nationality and language background. According to Wullur (2011), placement test is usually developed to check students' level of language proficiency in order to put them in the appropriate course level. In his study, placement test develops and validates the English performance test to serve as entrance test in colleges in Indonesia. Thus, the use of placement test is not actually a tool to judge students' performances but a guide on how students can approach the course and improve on their language abilities through the guidance of the teacher.

However, the choice of any placement test in most language programmes vary from institution to institution. Some institution buy from commercial publishing houses, modify their placement test from already existing ESL programmes, or select questions from their current textbooks (Brown, 1989). Baglantzi (2012) conducted a study on placement tests in English courses for Greek students. He highlighted the benefits of placement tests such as readily available resources for teachers using diagnostic tests like DIALANG. Far and Zoghi (2014) in their study looked at negative factors affecting students in English proficiency courses grouped as elementary and pre-intermediate levels. Their study within an educational context revealed that the personal relationship of the teacher with the learners, the attitude of the teacher, the style differences between teachers and students, and the type of class activities if not used positively to guide the students, can act as the demotivating factors. More so, Oxford (1998) carried out research on teacher's role in changing a learning atmosphere. The research was done through the analysis of the written works of 250 students about their learning experiences.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a triangulation method more precisely, the within-method in collecting and analysing the data. Within-method refers to the use of two or more data-collection collection procedures either same quantitative (like survey questionnaires and pre-existing database) or qualitative (using participants observation and interviews), but not both (quantitative and qualitative). Most researchers have found methodological triangulation to be beneficial in providing confirmation of findings, more comprehensive data, increased validity and enhanced understanding of the study in context (Bekhet and Zauszniewski, 2012).Thus, this study used the quantitative within-method through

the use of survey questionnaires and pre-existing database. It is worth-noting that in this approach the researcher did not manipulate independent variables or apply control conditions to the students understudy.

3.1. Respondents

The population for the study was some of the students enrolled in the English for Business courses at AMA International Training Institute in Bahrain. For analysis, some placement test results were compared to obtain a representative sample to show its effectiveness. For ethical reasons, participating survey questionnaire respondents were duly informed by the researcher stating the reason for the data collection was strictly for academic research purposes.
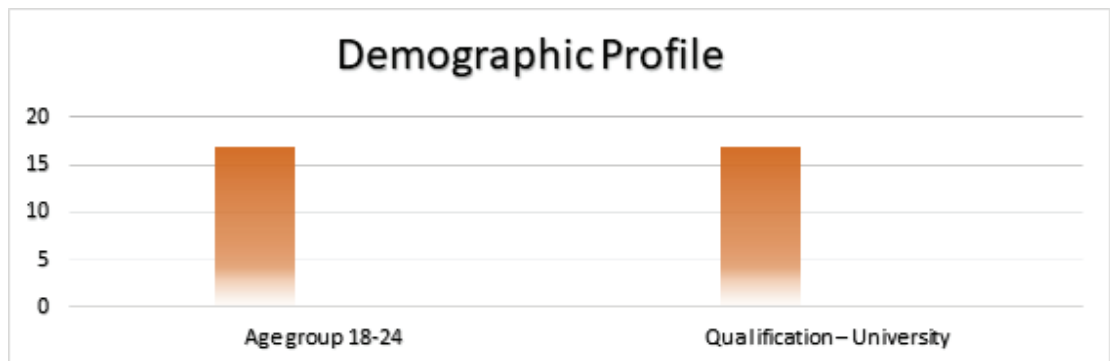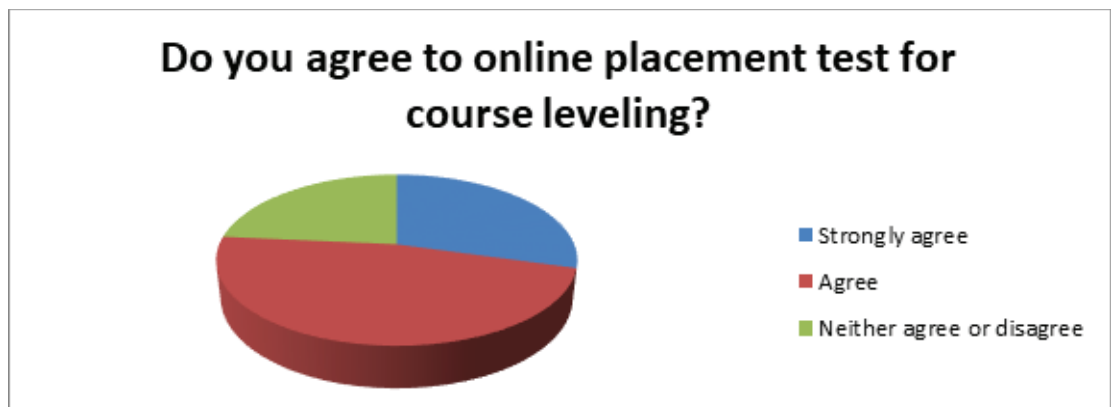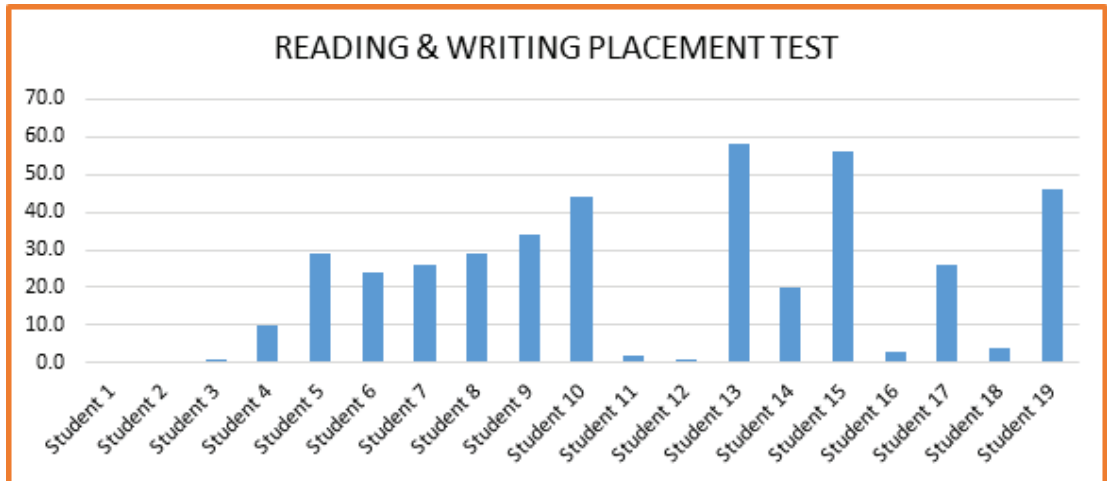
3.2. Research Questionnaire

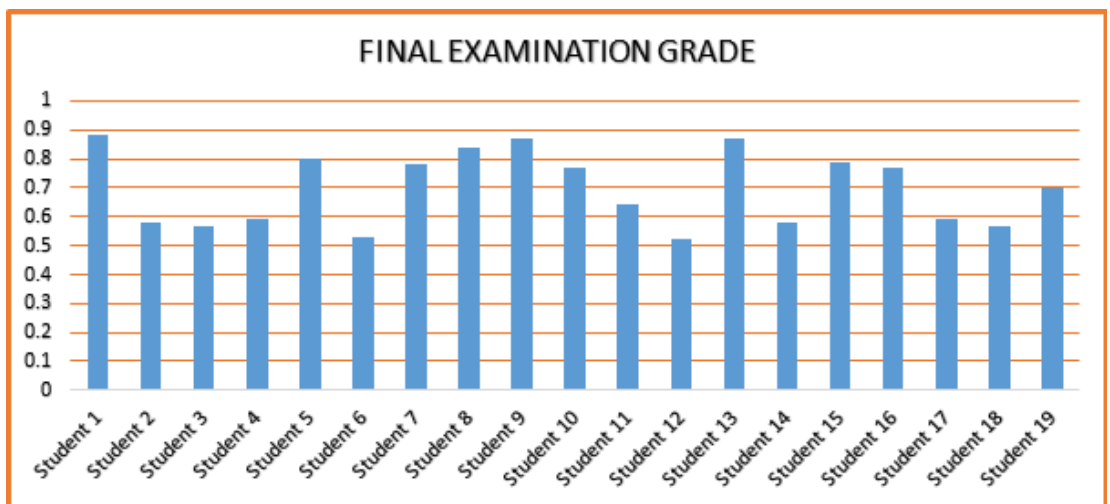**Figure** 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

3.3. Procedure

3.4. Data Analysis

The data for the study comprised of a total of thirty-six (36) students. Nineteen (19) students from pre-existing data had completed English for Business preliminary level (basic skill) within the duration of two months while the other seventeen (17) students completed the survey questionnaires as shown below:

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. What criteria are used to determine the course level of students before commencing any English language course?

Some of the criteria observed by the researcher in **Figure 1** showed that age and highest qualification were used to determine the course level of students before commencing the course. It is worth-noting that the researcher did not take into account the gender of the students in the data as it was not viewed as a valid criteria to determine who enrolled in the course. Firstly, training institutions usually cater for adult learners above the age of sixteen. Secondly, the minimum qualification in accordance with the Bahrain regulatory body is the secondary school qualification. Finally, in terms of communication skills, with reading and writing (grammar) as the compulsory skills test, it is normally used to determine the course level of students. Hence, on the basis of the defined band scores, all the students were grouped in the same level as preliminary level course. Also, they were classified based on their highest academic qualification, which in this case was secondary level of qualifications.

4.2. Do students support the use of online placement test for English course leveling?

Regarding the perception of the students towards the online placement test, the data from **Figure 2** clearly revealed that Bahraini students positively supported/agreed to the use of online placement test as stated in the data. Some of their comments to back up the chart on online placement test were the following:

1. Easier to understand by students.

2. More comfortable because we are in the age of technology and we should improve ourselves.

3. Available for everyone.

4. Saves time, money and reduces paper usage which is good for the environment.

5. Instant results, course leveling, and feedbacks with less human errors as well.

6. Integrating technology in education makes it more exciting and dynamic, "less boring" for students' interaction.

4.3. How does the English online placement test affect students' overall performances in the course?

The data showed that students with low OOPT grades in **Figure 3**, through guided support of the instructor, were able to put in more efforts and performed better final examination in **Figure 4**. The instructor provided guidance and support to learners throughout the duration of the course. The results proved that the students improved and gained positively due to the grades from the online placement test. Thus, the overall performances indicated in this study were in line with factors identified by a research done by Oxford (1998). The study also supports the findings of Mar and Zoghi (2014) in the sense that the researcher showed that the personal relationship of the teacher with the learners, the attitude of the teacher, the style differences between teachers and students, and the type of class activities all acted as the catalyst for their improvements.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study indicated that with technology, teaching and learning could be greatly improved and knowledge gained. Hence, in order to enjoy a better educational learning context, students should try to do their best in obtaining better results throughout the learning process while teachers should help their students in actualizing their educational goals.

All in all, the study on the roles of online placement test in have shed new light on the importance of technology as a prerequisite tool in aiding English language teaching especially amongst Bahraini students who live in a more sophisticated world.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, this paper recommends that more online placement tests should be used in all English-taught courses and internationally-recognised qualifications, by so doing, both the teachers and students will be able to implement effective up-to-date technology and introduce trendy classroom innovations.

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