

iSPEAK: Using Mobile-Based Online Learning Course to Learn ‘English for the Workplace’

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Abstract—Due to the rise of the digital era, various industries demand employees with a proficient communicative English skills, but many are still not up to par with the demands. One solution for this is to provide communicative English trainings for employees, especially support staffs, yet face-to-face trainings have many limitations, which can be overcome through mobile learning. Due to the fact that mobile learning can be accessed anytime and anywhere by anyone, the Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC) is one of the platforms that can be used to curb the issue. This paper aimed to identify the perceptions of support staffs towards using ‘iSPEAK: English for the Workplace’ in MOOC. A total of 30 respondents were selected through purposive sampling and a survey through a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire was given out. The main findings showed that overall, the support staffs have a positive attitude towards using iSPEAK. Nevertheless, half of them were unsure of the reliability of the sources available in the course. However, the findings of this study implied that iSPEAK could be one of the training alternatives for support staffs to improve and increase their communicative ability. Future research can look into designing and developing various modules of communicative English in various mobile learning platforms, which could cater to different levels of proficiency of learners.

Keywords—Communicative English; English for the Workplace, MOOC, self-paced learning, support staffs, technology-enhanced language learning

1 Introduction

In this new digital era, aside from the rapidly evolving technologies, the status of the English language as a global language is irrefutable. The importance of mastering the English language has been emphasised in many non-native countries as a means of communication [1], [2]. Employers are keener on hiring employees with good proficiency in the English language. This is due to the fact that in order to bring an organisation up, relations with international organisations is crucial, which requires interaction with foreigners [3], [5]. Hence, the only means of communication with people of different mother tongues is through the use of English.

Yet, even in this 21st-century world, many employers complained that their employees do not possess the required proficiency in communicative English [6], [8]. The lack of English proficiency among employees causes an organisation to not be able to rise to its potential. Due to that, communicative English training for employees, especially support staffs is important. However, looking at the busy schedule and working commitments throughout the year, certain employers find it difficult to conduct trainings to improve their employees' communicative English. This is because trainings need to be comprehensive and relaxed [4] so that the employees do not feel stressed in learning communicative English.

Hence, to curb the issue of time constraint, exploiting technology can be an alternative [9], [10]. An open learning platform can be used as a substitute for face-to-face training. Open learning platforms, such as the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) has been recognised worldwide as a free learning platform. It has various benefits which include being free, open and allows learners to learn at their own pace [11], [12]. The fact that everyone has their own mobile device [13] is also an advantage and should be fully utilized when it comes to learning. One of the MOOC courses available to improve the communicative English of employees is known as 'iSPEAK: English for the Workplace', which is hoped to be able to provide a better learning experience for employees to improve their communicative English as they are learning at their own pace. To further improve this course in MOOC, this study aimed to identify the perceptions of support staffs towards using iSPEAK, an online self-paced learning module to improve communicative English for the workplace.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Self-paced learning

In this globalized era, education is not only restricted to classroom learning. Self-paced learning brings the meaning of learning independently, in which lesser interaction happens between the teacher and student [14]. One of the reasons for the arising need in self-paced learning is due to time constraint [15]. This is because, most of the learners are occupied with their own routine, so they have lesser time to learn a new skill. Learners who are working gain more benefits from this self-paced learning. Working learners have a tight working schedule, whereby they need to balance between their job prospects and time for family [15]. These learners do not have much time to go for classes to learn a new language or skill. With the worrying scenario of the decline in English language proficiency among workers [16], employers either provide training for their staffs or they will find new staffs to replace the old ones. Due to that, MOOC has been an uprising platform for learners to learn a new skill or language independently at any place and time [17], [19].

2.2 Self-paced learning through MOOC

In self-paced learning through MOOC, learners are more prone to complete a course if it is not too lengthy [20], [22]. This is because a lengthy course will make learners feel bored and they might feel burdened as they have to juggle between their job time and learning independently. Learners who find MOOC to be burdening tend to drop out of MOOC without completing the course [21]. These dropout learners prefer a more relevant and shorter course which they can learn in their own pace and the outcome is achievable. Plus, learners are not able to commit their time for MOOC because of their non-supportive learning environment. Learners who are pressured by their surroundings in working, such as having tight working schedules and non-supportive employers will affect their completion rate in MOOC too [20].

The main reason for the success of self-paced learning is because employees feel more appreciated [23]. Additionally, with the support from employers, employees are more willing to learn by themselves to develop their professionalism to suit the demand of the working field, which could also benefit the organization [23], [24]. Other than employers' support, the reason for self-paced learning is also due to the MOOC's characteristic, which is openness. Some studies have shown that MOOC provides an open, flexible and easy to access platform, which is suitable for everyone and can cater to the workers' needs [25], [28]. Findings from previous studies showed that learners have different intentions to use MOOC. Learners with the goal of lifelong learning, such as to improve their skills for employability in the future will have a positive attitude towards MOOC [29], [30]. Some learners also enrol in MOOC because they want credits for their courses [31]. Regardless of the reasons for learners' enrolment in MOOC, the factors which keep learners learning in MOOC are more important. Factors such as easy to use and useful are usually the crucial reasons [32], [33] other than being reliable, accessible and provides a comfortable learning environment [31]. Plus, learners who are positive towards learning through MOOC tend to have a higher completion rate of the online course [34] and learners are more attracted to MOOC if they have their own autonomy in choosing what they want to learn first [35], [36]. However, a study reported findings that showed that learners, especially older learners, prefer MOOC to be used as an addition to their traditional face-to-face training because the learners are unexposed to the proper ways in accessing materials in MOOC effectively [37]. But, in this digital era, technology is not an alienated tool anymore [9], [38].

Hence, in order to identify learners' thoughts towards MOOC, the technology acceptance model (TAM) is used as the framework, whereby variables of perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEOU) and attitude towards using (ATU) MOOC are identified. This is due to the fact that, despite being in the 21st-century era, the challenges of using technology such as low computer literacy, insufficient resources and inaccessible online materials which were a barrier back then [39] are still the barriers now to some older users [40], [42].

2.3 The use of mobile for learning

With a lot of technologies available, mobile phones are the most common tool which is possessed by almost everyone [13]. Mobile phones, which were initially used for communication purposes are now being used in learning. The changes in features of mobile phones through the years have made it possible to induce learning in a mobile form [43]. The term mobile learning or m-learning has become popular among researchers, whereby the benefits of mobile learning is undeniable. The most important feature of mobile learning lies in its flexibility to be used anywhere and any-time [44], [45]. Additionally, mobile learning also condones to self-paced learning, which is said to provide a personalised learning environment for learners who are able to participate in the lesson freely, without any restriction. This allows learners to be more motivated and engaged in the learning [44], [46]. Hence, the advantages of mobile learning, especially mobile learning through MOOC, provides an array of benefits for learners, especially learners with working commitments.

2.4 The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The technology acceptance model or TAM was developed to predict and identify an individual's perceptions towards using a technology [47]. In this model, there are five constructs known as the perceived ease of use (PEOU), perceived usefulness (PU), attitude towards using (ATU), behavioural intention (BI) and actual use [47]. PEOU and PU are related to the BI and ATU because learners or users who perceived a technology to be useful and effortless will be more prone to use it in aiding their daily tasks [48], [49]. Additionally, technology users who perceive technology to be useful will have a more positive attitude and their intention to use it regularly is higher [48]. As TAM emerges, many researchers in the technological field are more inclined towards using the model to evaluate the usability of technology because TAM is simple and easy to understand [49]. Figure 1 depicts the technology acceptance model (TAM).

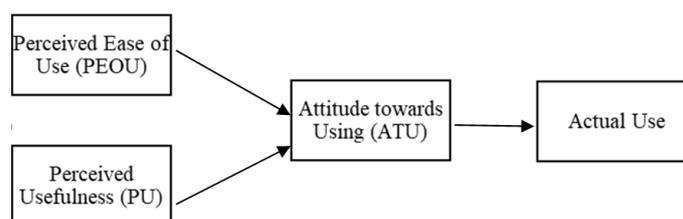


Fig. 1. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Figure 1 is the adapted version of TAM, which is adapted from Davis (1986) [48]. In TAM, the three main constructs are the Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Attitude towards Using (ATU). This means that if a user perceives a technology to be easy and useful, they will have a more positive attitude

towards using it. Then, ATU will determine the Actual Use of technology. It is also important to know whether the course is user-friendly in terms of usefulness and easy to use, which can influence the attitude and behaviour. In this case, if a user has a positive attitude towards technology, he or she will develop an intention to use it. The intention to use will affect the actual usage of the technology. Hence, this model gives an insight towards users’ acceptance towards a new technological tool, which is important to know whether the users will use it or not.

3 Methodology

This empirical study employed a survey method of data collection, which consists of a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire. Respondents were chosen using purposive sampling, whereby they attended a workshop to demonstrate the usage of iSPEAK: Communicative English Module MOOC. iSPEAK is a Communicative English Module in MOOC, which consists of ten modules of English for workplace training as shown in Figure 2.



Fig. 2. The ten modules available in iSPEAK

As portrayed in figure 2, the ten modules are named as module 1 to 10, which consist of the introduction, greetings, talking on the phone, making requests, offering help, giving suggestions, handling complaints, email or letter writing, show and tell (presentation skill) and conclusion respectively. Each module except the introduction and conclusion consists of four subsections. Figure 3 below shows the sample of the subsections in the modules.

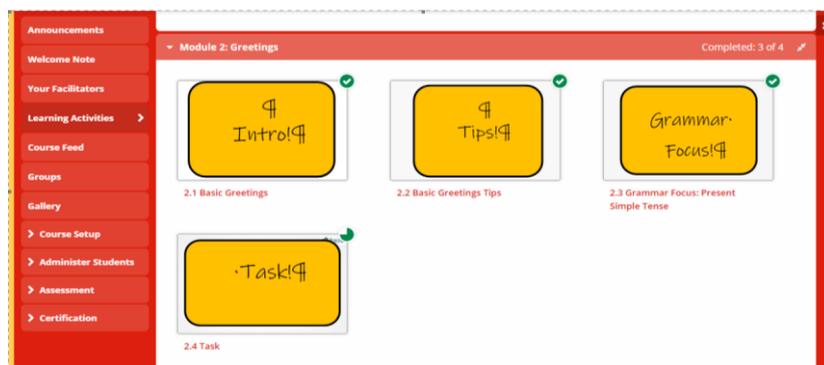


Fig. 3. Sample of subsections in Module 2

Based on the figure, it can be seen that there are four subsections for the module known as the video content, notes, grammar focus and task. All learners are required to complete the course to get a certificate of completion. Upon completion of the workshop, all 30 participants were asked to go through iSPEAK and try out all learning activities. Later, they were required to respond to a questionnaire, which consisted of 40 items, divided into four parts, which are the demographic background, with eight items, perceived ease of use (PEOU) in part 2 with six items, perceived usefulness (PU) in part 3 with eight items and attitude towards using (ATU) in part 4 which consisted of eight items. All items were adapted from Norizan and Hussein (2017) [50] and Rosly and Khalid (2018) [51]. A pilot study was carried out to determine the reliability of this questionnaire and the Cronbach Alpha value of 0.88 showed that the questionnaire is reliable. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics in terms of percentages and frequency count.

4 Results

4.1 Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

Based on the survey, the data on support staffs’ perceived ease of use (PEOU) towards iSPEAK were plotted into table 1.

Table 1. Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) towards iSPEAK

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think iSPEAK is easy to use	3.3% (1)	3.3% (1)	40.0% (12)	53.3% (16)
I think iSPEAK is easy to master in a short time	3.3% (1)	30.0% (9)	60.0% (18)	3.3% (1)
I think iSPEAK is easy to understand (interface and menus)	3.3% (1)	6.7% (2)	60.0% (18)	30.0% (9)
I think it is essential for learners to possess computer basic skills (e.g. saving files, creating folders) to benefit from iSPEAK	3.3% (1)	6.7% (2)	43.3% (13)	46.7% (14)
I think it is essential for learners to possess Internet basic skills (e.g. sending emails, signing in/out, downloading/uploading files) to benefit from iSPEAK	3.3% (1)	3.3% (1)	36.7% (11)	56.7% (17)
I need a lot of training on using computers/Internet to learn effectively through iSPEAK	3.3% (1)	20.0% (6)	33.3% (10)	43.3% (13)

Based on the table, it can be seen that most respondents perceived iSPEAK to be overall easy. They agreed that iSPEAK is easy to use (93.3%), easy to master in a short time (90%) and easy to understand (90%). Despite being easy to use, a majority of them agreed that knowing the basic skills of computers is important in order to access iSPEAK with ease (93.4%).

4.2 Perceived Usefulness (PU)

Table 2 below displayed the results for support staffs’ perceived usefulness (PU) towards iSPEAK.

Table 2. Perceived Usefulness (PU) towards iSPEAK

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think learning English through an open online course, such as iSPEAK is useful in improving my communicative English	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	46.7% (14)	53.3% (16)
I think iSPEAK can be a useful training platform for workers	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (15)	50.0% (15)
I think learning through iSPEAK can increase my productivity in learning	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	40.0% (12)	60.0% (18)
I think iSPEAK is a useful tool in developing my English writing skill	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	40.0% (12)	60.0% (18)
I think iSPEAK is a useful tool in developing my English reading skill	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	46.7% (14)	53.3% (16)
I think iSPEAK is a useful tool in developing my English listening skill	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	46.7% (14)	53.3% (16)
I think iSPEAK is a useful tool in developing my English speaking skill	20.0% (6)	26.7% (8)	26.7% (8)	26.7% (8)
iSPEAK is able to provide effective learning resources	23.3% (7)	26.7% (8)	26.7% (8)	23.3% (7)

Referring to table 2, all respondents agreed that iSPEAK is useful in improving their communicative English, is a useful training platform for workers, increases their productivity in learning and useful in improving their English listening, reading and writing skills (100%). However, 53.4% of the respondents agreed that i

SPEAK improves their English speaking skills and only half of them agreed that iSPEAK is able to provide effective learning resources (50%).

4.3 Attitude Towards Using (ATU)

The support staffs’ attitude towards iSPEAK were displayed in table 3 below.

Table 3. Attitude towards Using (ATU) iSPEAK

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am eager for learning communicative English through iSPEAK	0.0% (0)	6.7% (2)	43.3% (13)	50.0% (15)
Using iSPEAK to learn communicative English is better than using the traditional instructions	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)	66.7% (20)	30.0% (9)
I really need iSPEAK to improve my communicative English	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	56.7% (17)	43.3% (13)
I like to chat through the iSPEAK forums	0.0% (0)	6.7% (2)	56.7% (17)	36.7% (11)
Learning communicative English through iSPEAK makes me nervous	16.7% (5)	43.3% (13)	26.7% (8)	13.3% (4)
Learning communicative English through iSPEAK is not interesting	36.7% (11)	33.3% (10)	16.7% (5)	13.3% (4)
Using the iSPEAK to learn communicative English bothers me	33.3% (10)	40.0% (12)	13.3% (4)	13.3% (4)
Using the iSPEAK to learn communicative English scares me	43.3% (13)	30.0% (9)	13.3% (4)	13.3% (4)

Based on the results from the survey as plotted in table 3, it can be seen that a majority of the respondents have positive attitude towards using iSPEAK as they are eager to learn with iSPEAK (93.3%), they like it as it is better than traditional instructions (96.7%) and they like to chat through the forums (93.4%). All of the respondents responded that they need iSPEAK to improve their communicative English (100%).

5 Discussion

The findings showed an overall positive perception of support staffs towards using iSPEAK. The most crucial factor which contributes to the positivity lies in the usefulness of MOOC [26]. As can be seen, a majority of support staffs perceived iSPEAK to be useful in assisting them in learning Communicative English for the Workplace. This is deemed important because a tool which is perceived to be not useful will not be used by learners. Not only that, MOOC as mentioned in many studies, is undeniably useful as it allows learners to learn at their own pace, which will indirectly max-

imise the learning input gained as learners are able to put more emphasis in learning at their own time rather than learning everything in one day [30], [32]. Due to that feature of MOOC, learners are interested in using iSPEAK as it provides a useful learning environment, which could cater to various learners, especially adult learners who are working.

Next, iSPEAK is easy to use as perceived by the support staffs. This is because MOOC has an easy interface and it also provides a tour or guidelines for first-time learners [31]. Learners find it easy to master iSPEAK in a short time as MOOC only deals with basic computer skills such as downloading and uploading files. Regardless of that, it is important to note the targeted audience as well to ensure that the interface of iSPEAK can be created in a user-friendly manner for those who are unfamiliar with it. Browsing through the learners’ background, a learner’s age might influence their perceived ease of use (PEOU) as older learners might not be a technology-savvy [41], [42]. Yet, with the current revolution, almost everyone owns a mobile phone, in which MOOC can be accessed through the applications available, which is equally convenient for everyone [9], [10].

Finally, iSPEAK sparks positive attitudes from the support staffs. Most learners agreed that they are eager to learn through iSPEAK. One of the reasons is due to time constraint for face-to-face learning [4]. Using MOOC, learners can access learning anywhere and anytime they want based on their own free time [30], [34], [35], [52]. Due to that, they prefer to use MOOC rather than attending face-to-face training courses. Plus, learners who are well aware of the importance of learning CE are more inclined to use iSPEAK to improve themselves.

6 Conclusion

This paper aimed to find out the perceptions of support staffs towards iSPEAK. The findings reported positive perceptions towards using iSPEAK as a platform for self-paced learning. However, some learners are still unsure of the reliability of the resources available in iSPEAK, either they are useful for their workplace or not. Thus, this paper implied that employers can look into alternatives to improve their staffs’ communicative English by encouraging them to enrol in iSPEAK. In the future, research can look into designing and developing various modules of communicative English in various platforms, which could cater to different levels of proficiency of learners. With that, online open learning can be an educational tool which could be an alternative learning platform for everyone especially in encouraging self-paced learning.

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