STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING SEMMINDER ENGLISH PLANNER IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The use of traditional notebook remains relevant among students despite there being numerous kinds of planners and writing pads sold on the market to cater the needs of consumers today. For some, the experience of using a notebook cannot be traded with the use of writing gadgets. Using notebooks also could assist with individual learnings as using appropriate supplemental materials and methods to organize and present only relevant information is thought to be able to increase the efficiency of the self-learning process (Ruiji, 2012). With literature on notebooks as the basis, this paper is attempting to extend the concept to the use of planner for class. The purpose of this paper is to study students' perceptions of SemMinder English Planner (SEP) as a personalized planner in language learning. This paper also opens up a way for educators to incorporate their current lessons and materials into a personalized planner to increase students' motivation and achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Education and learning tools play an important role towards students' learning outcomes, performance, and satisfaction (Fullan, 2012). The outcomes of using these tools are significant such as increasing student activity in class and improving the efficiency of the whole teaching process. One of the important issues is establishing a methodology of embedding supplemental materials in order to improve learning process (Kay, 2012). Ruiji (2012) also states that the use of appropriate supplemental materials and methods to organize and present only relevant information may also increase the efficiency of the self-learning process. Therefore, a group of lecturers from Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Melaka Branch intends to initiate the use of personalized planners particularly in language learning. The

innovation of conventional planner into SemMinder English Planner (SEP) becomes a major motivation for students as it could increase their engagement and improve their satisfaction in self-learning process. Considering this hypothesis, students' satisfaction, as an important outcome of a self-learning process, should be analyzed more closely. The quality of students' satisfaction and experience depend on the effectiveness of using notebook. In this paper, the efficiency of using SEP in self-learning process is delineated.

The term SemMinder is coming from a word combination of "semester" and "minder" which describes the planner as a "guardian" and "guide" to the students. SemMinder English Planner provides a structure and at the same time serves as the organizational anchor for students to gather their note during lesson. It is specifically designed for interim students taking the course ELC121: Integrated Language Skills I. Among the features of SEP are:

i.   Course information

The notebook contains course information which holds important information for the students such as course content and list of assessments.

ii.   Weekly notes

The organizer found in the planner is structured into 7 weeks which makes it easy for students to jot down important information weekly based on the number of weeks that they have in interim semester.

iii.   Self-evaluation and self-reflection

The self-evaluation and self-reflection allow students to assess their own strengths and weaknesses towards English language skills proficiency.

iv.   Study tips and notes

The planner also provides students with numerous study tips and notes especially on how they can improve their English proficiency and get prepared for assessments and final test.

v.   Habit trackers

The habit trackers are provided in order for students to fill up which can help them to track what they have done during their Students' Learning Time. These trackers specify on L-Listen, I-Interact, R-Reflect, A-Act (LIRA), reading and grammar parts.

SemMinder English Planner serves as a one-comprehensive planner which contains all information deemed as important for students who registered for ELC121: Integrated Language Skills I. Normally, course information is handed out to students as a separate document which most often than not will be misplaced by students. However, by becoming an integral part of SEP, students can always have the document with them and serve as a reference from time to time. Students will become more aware of the course content and the assessments without having to be reminded constantly by the instructor. Next, SEP encourages students to jot down note in class and be active participants in their learning. They will be able to keep track of any missing information during their lesson. Through the use of SEP, students are expected to become more responsible for their own learning. They can become more involved and attentive during

lessons as well as becoming more precise in taking note. In addition, SEP helps students to organize lesson notes systematically as they learn. They are also allowed to use a variety of organizational techniques such as topic headings, color-coding, and different writing styles to give coherence to what they learn. Therefore, SEP could become a portfolio of individual learning and become a record of each student's growth.

Furthermore, this paper acts as a one of the platform to remind educators of the value of learning styles, incorporating multiple intelligences in their lessons, and the study on brain that supports how learning takes place. It is because of this paper suggests a way for educators to organize all of the information in their lessons through the use of SEP. It is hoped that educators will be able to integrate their current lessons and materials into SEP in order to increase students' motivation and achievement.

The purpose of this paper is also to assess on how SEP can help students and teachers alike to organize and synthesize information given to them in class. The reasoning behind the innovation of SEP originated with instructional strategies such as note taking, concept mapping, and organization of information as well as brain research about how students learn best.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant amount of research has been done in the areas of learning styles, multiple intelligences and strategies for note taking. However, to date, there has been little research applied to personalized planner. Therefore, this section will focus on the theories that support the use of it. When considering the use of personalized planner, educators must be cognizant of the learning styles and intelligence strengths of each student and how to accommodate them. Each classroom has a wide range of students with an equally wide range of interests and abilities. The teacher must have the ability to accommodate these various abilities, in order to properly plan and conduct assignments and assess what students have learned (Manner, 2001). In this case, personalized planner could be of great assistance to educators as they provide educators with an organizational tool for their lessons, encouraging the use of different types of lessons, and can be helpful when planning for the learning styles of students.

According to Gardner (2006), there are eight different types of intelligences; linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Though students tend to be strong in some intelligence areas and weak in others, it is important for them to be exposed to all types of intelligences. Educators can use the personalized planner to plan lessons to reach a broad spectrum of intelligences. In addition, there is a study on brain that indicates the importance of note taking and teaching students according to their learning styles (Wist, 2006). Though educators do not necessarily need an in-depth knowledge of the brain, a basic knowledge of its functions can be helpful when planning lessons. The brain is divided into different sections, each with a separate function. The cerebral part of the brain is divided in the right and left hemisphere. "The hemispheres are divided into the occipital lobe that processes visual information, the temporal lobe processing auditory information and some memory and the parietal lobe processing feeling and touch. The frontal lobe specializes in decision-making planning and problem solving" (Stickel, 2005).

As educators plan, they should think about creating lessons that involve all of the lobes in the brain. Personalized planners are potentially an effective means to organize information to accomplish this. Using personalized planner could help students remember and review information needed for assessments and matters related to their classes. If students are given information to be recorded on their planner, they can put the information into their own words, drawings, etc. This helps the "brain by making connections

between what is experienced (learned) and what that experience (information) means to the learner" (Caine, Caine, McClintic and Klimek, 2005). To sum up, personalized planner can help student's process information, study and review for assessments, and personalize the content knowledge being presented. The same planner can help educators plan lessons that reach a range of students' abilities and learning styles. Overall, a personalized planner is an organizational tool for educators and students.

Note Taking Skill

Note taking is an essential skill for almost everybody, especially for students. Note taking is considered as part of writing skill where it helps students to learn as well as to write. The main purpose of note taking is to record information and/or to aid reflection (Boch and Piolat, 2005). Reflection is also an integral part of learning process where issues can be solved and sound judgement can be made. Therefore, undoubtedly it is an important skill that should be acquired by students. Research has shown that taking note in class and reviewing note have positive impact on student learning (DeZure, Kaplan and Deerman, 2001). Kiewra, DuBoishane, Meyerhoffer and Roskelley (1991) found that students who took note in class scored higher than students who did not take note. Moreover, according to Johnstone and Su (1994, as cited in DeZure et al., 2001), "the more students record, the more they remember and the better they perform on exams".

As mentioned earlier, note taking serves a great deal of benefits in enhancing effective learning among students. In this section, the functions of note taking will be explained more specifically. The first function of note taking is external storage. Notes are seen as a space to keep knowledge and information and it is unquestionably an important function when it is paired with the act of reviewing the notes (Boye, 2012). The second function of note taking is for cognitive encoding. The act of writing the note actually helps students to store the knowledge and information in their brain. Foos, Mora and Tkacz, (1994, as cited in Boye, 2012) and Katayama (2005, as cited in Boye, 2012) show that "people better retain materials that they have generated themselves (i.e., personal notes) than materials generated by others (i.e., someone else's notes), and that students actually begin to learn and memorize during note-taking".

The Student-centred Approach

The Malaysian Ministry of Education has introduced student-centred learning more than 20 years ago (Tengku Kasim, 2012). This is mainly because the Malaysian government has identified student-centred learning as one approach which is deemed to be effective in educating the students in Malaysia. The characteristics of student-centred approach are in line with the use of personalized student planner because as stated before, one of the objectives of personalized planner is to promote self-learning process. Active learning is the key here as found by Tengku Kasim (2012) in her study, students in Malaysia do value active learning where students' engagement and ownership of the content material are emphasised and reflection by the individual as part of self-learning processes is encouraged. Such is also the case of the use of personalized student planner where students own the content material and are able to use it as in reflecting the lesson.

Though it must be stated here that implementing student-centred learning approach is not without its own challenges (Na Li, 2012), the use of personalized student planner could be one of the solutions to those challenges because it takes into account of individual differences. Thus, the planner itself can be personalized to suit students' individuality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling

A sample of respondents in this study was drawn from interim students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Melaka Branch, Alor Gajah Campus. Sample selection was based on non-probability convenience sampling with a total of 88 respondents. A self-administered closed questionnaire had been given to the respondents in the first week of semester as an entrance survey and last week of semester as an exit survey. The questionaire has four parts; (i) Part A: Demography profile, (ii) Part B: Students' perceptions of SEP, (iii) Students' perceptions about the use of SEP, and (iv) Comments and recommendations. The constructs in Part C were then measured using the five point Likert rating scale with the following form: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5). High scores indicate favourable attitude while low scores indicate unfavourable attitudes.

Demographic Profile

A total of 88 students participated in this study. 40 respondents were male (45.5%) and 48 respondents were female (54.5%). Meanwhile, 44 respondents were from Faculty of Art and Design (50%) and 44 respondents were from Faculty of Communication and Media Studies (50%), UiTM Melaka Branch, Alor Gajah Campus.

FINDINGS

Table 1 displays frequency distribution of the frequency of using personalized planner in class. There are 43.2% from the total of 88 students which state that they sometimes use personalized planner, 31.8% of them always use personalized planner and 13.6% of them use personalized planner very often in class. Therefore, it could be interpreted that these students are familiar with the use of personalized planners in class.

Table 1 The number and percentage of respondents' frequency of using personalized planners in class

No.	Frequency	Number	Percentage
1	Never	2	2.3
2	Rarely	8	9.1
3	Sometimes	38	43.2
4	Always	28	31.8
5	Very often	12	13.6

Results from Table 1 also show that most of the students are basically familiar to use personalized planners in class. In light of this, the demand for having personalized planners as one of the learning aids is still continuing despite of the use of educational technology (e-learning) to facilitate and improve teaching and learning process. In order to cater the continuous demand for personalized planners, there must have unique selling points to ensure the marketability of having it especially in language learning. Therefore, researches intend to verify students' perceptions on the uniqueness of *SEP* and their desire to buy it for learning purposes. In general, the results show that all of the students also agree that they like the features

of *SEP* for its unique selling points and they are willing to buy the planner with affordable price. Table 2 summaries the comparison of chosen unique selling points between before (entrance survey) and after (exit survey) the use of *SEP* in class.

Table 2 Comparison of chosen unique selling points between before (entrance survey) and after (exit survey) the use of *SEP* in class

No.	Features	Entrance survey		Exit survey	
		Frequency	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Study tips and notes	80	90.9	78	88.6
2	Self-evaluation	20	22.7	28	31.8
3	Habit trackers	22	25.0	22	25.0
4	Self-reflection	22	31.8	32	36.4
5	Weekly notes	50	56.8	54	61.4

(*All respondents are allowed to choose one or more features which they think could be the potential unique selling points for *SEP*.)

Based on Table 2, there are five major features which make *SEP* different from other personalized notebooks; (i) study tips and notes, (ii) self-evaluation, (iii) habit trackers, (iv) self-reflection, and (v) weekly notes. It can be seen that study tips and notes serve as the major selling points for *SEP*. The students feel that they could improve their English proficiency and also get prepared for assessments and final test through graphical and mind-mapping notes. The students also agree that weekly notes are one of the unique features that could help students to jot down important information more systematically.

Other than that, there are also an increase number of students who choose self-evaluation and self-reflection as one of the selling points for *SEP*. Therefore, it shows that *SEP* can be an effective learning aid especially in self-learning. It is because of it enables students to become more aware of the importance of self-evaluation and self-reflection in language learning.

Table 3 Comparison between before (entrance survey) and after (exit survey) the use of *SEP* in terms of mean and standard deviation values

Item	Students' perception of using *SEP* in language learning	Entrance		Exit		Exit - Entrance	
		Mean	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
C4	Facilitate note taking process in class	4.11	0.784	4.14	0.734	0.03	0.549
C6	Facilitate self-concentration in class	3.64	0.685	3.73	0.758	0.09	0.741

C7	Facilitate self-awareness on lesson taught in class	3.86	0.765	4.00	0.647	0.14	0.795
C8	Facilitate course revision	4.00	0.747	4.11	0.689	0.11	0.722
C10	Prevent misplacing or forgetting notes and course information, compared to having them scribbled on loose papers	4.11	0.945	4.07	0.728	-0.04	0.888
C12	Cultivate the habit of preparing lesson planning	3.73	0.845	3.89	0.689	0.16	0.680
C13	Facilitate self-revision on difficult topics	3.90	0.858	4.06	0.789	0.16	0.861
C14	Motivate self-revision of class lessons	3.98	0.762	4.11	0.722	0.13	0.632
C15	Improve note taking skills	4.02	0.792	4.09	0.741	0.07	0.789

Table 3 indicates a comparison between before (entrance survey) and after (exit survey) the use of *SEP* in terms of mean and standard deviation values. Students need to give their perceptions toward the effectiveness of using *SEP* based on the listed items in both entrance and exit surveys.

Based on Table 3, there are five statements which serve as the major concerns among these students before they use *SEP* for *ELC121*. There are specifically on note taking process (item C4), course revision (item C8), self-revision of class lessons (item C14) and note-taking skills (item C15). Most of the students also feel that it is important to have *SEP* because it could prevent them from misplacing or forgetting notes and course information (item C10). Normally, course information is handed out to students as a separate document which most often than not will be misplaced by students. However, by becoming an integral part of the notebook, students can always have the document with them and serve as a reference from time to time. Students will become more aware of the course content and the assessments without having to be reminded constantly by the instructor.

Other than that, students feel that *SEP* would help them to facilitate self-concentration in class (item C6). This is because of *SEP* encourages them to do their own notes more often (entrance survey item C15, mean = 4.02, standard deviation = 0.792). Therefore, they feel that it would help them to facilitate self-awareness on lesson taught in class as well (item C7).

Based on the comparison between mean and standard deviation values for both entrance and exit surveys, there are positive differences in terms of mean value (items C4, C6, C7, C8, C12, C13, C14 and C15). In other words, the students give higher mean values after the use of *SEP*. Meanwhile, mean values for items C12 and C13 state the highest changes, 0.16. Therefore, these show that most of students agree that *SEP* helps them to cultivate the habit of preparing lesson planning (item C12) and facilitate self-revision on difficult topics (item C13). However, mean value for item C10 has a decrease (-0.04) in exit survey, but it still has mean value more than 4.00.

To sum up, these findings suggest that all of the students have favourable attitude towards the use of *SEP* in class. They feel that it could help them especially in note taking process and course revision. *SEP* also assists them to increase their self-concentration, self-awareness and self-revision on class lessons as well as to improve their note-taking skills. These are also serving as basic prerequisites for success in academic. Therefore, it can be said that the use of *SEP* in class is in line with the student-centred approach.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to determine students' perceptions of SemMinder English Planner (SEP) as a learning aid in language learning. Based on the statistical analyses, all students demonstrated favourable attitude towards the use of SEP in class. They believe that SEP could be an effective learning aid as it helps them particularly in note taking process, course revision, and improving self-concentration in class, aside from improving note-taking skills. Most students also feel that it is important to have SEP because it could prevent them from misplacing notes, reminders, and course information which are usually provided in loose sheets. The planner can also be personalized to suit students' individuality. All of the features listed fulfil most of the characteristics of student-centred approach.

Furthermore, the fact that some of the latest gadgets currently trying to recreate the sensation of writing using hands should be enough proof that note taking is still considered important, more so among academic community where taking notes from lectures or between academicians is essential. Given the benefits that it offers, note-taking should be considered as one of the skills that should be taught to students as it helps them to organize, review, and reflect on the information in the classroom. This undoubtedly could help students in their learning. Future work should also be done on how this personalized planner can be integrated with technological advances within the domain of teaching and learning.

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