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## Reexamining Academic Reading Skills of Unemployed Graduates through the English Language E-Training (ELET) Module

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### Abstract

The study investigates the effects of the English Language E-Training (ELET) Reading Module in Enhancing the academic reading skills among 30 BBA(Bachelor of Business Administration) unemployed graduates. The research consists of a pretest, the application of the module and the post-test. A survey questionnaire was also deployed in order to find out the participants' learning styles and readiness towards the ESP e-training program as well as their perception towards the online module. The findings revealed that the ELET Reading module is able to significantly enhance the participants' academic reading skills. Furthermore, the survey indicates the participants' readiness and positive reception towards ELET reading module.

**Keywords:** *E-Training, Academic Reading, Online Learning, ESL*

### 1. Background

Graduate unemployability is a serious rising concern for Malaysia. The unemployment rate among Malaysian youths rose 1.2% from an estimated 9.5% to 10.7% in 2015. In comparison, the national unemployment rate went up by 0.2% from 2.9% to 3.1% (Bank Negara Malaysia Annual Report, 2016). The Ministry of Education Graduate Tracer Report 2015 (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia) showed that there were 273,373 graduates in 2015 and a large number hold Bachelor's Degree and Diploma, 45% and 43% of all graduates, respectively. Of particular concern, among these graduates, 24% were still unemployed. The rising trend of unemployed graduates in the country has been the focus of several studies (Chiew, 2013; Ismail, Hussin & Darus, 2012a; Ismail, Soo & Ismail, 2015). A few factors contribute to this growing problem. One of the most frequently cited factors is the graduates' poor soft skills. The lack of soft skills in turn

has been linked to a number of factors, the most fundamental of which is language input (Darmi & Albion, 2013; Md Razak, Mohd Yusof, Syazana, Jaafar & Talib, 2014; The Star, 2015).

To that end, the ELET (English Language E-Training) which is the main feature of this study, was created with the aim to help undergraduates develop the following skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. ELET is an online program via the use of a Learning Management System (LMS,) which consists of four (4) English language modules that are: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The online modules are developed based on the findings of the ELET needs analysis study conducted prior to the research. The online program also uses the Autonomous Learning Model (Betts & Kercher, 1999), the related ESL communicative learning theories (Krashen 1981, Krashen 1985; Kroonenberg, 1995; Kuhn & Chuo, 2002) as well as the Framework for Supplementary Online English Learning Module (Noriah Ismail, Saadiyah Darus & Supyan Hussin, 2012) as its basis. However, for the purpose of this study only the ELET Reading Module is used to discover whether it is able to enhance the participants' academic reading skills. In addition, the study investigates the participants' readiness and positive reception towards the e-training module. The result of this study can be used for designing an online training program for academic reading skill. Finally, the research will also propose recommendations for a model revision and several possible directions for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

Technology is integral to academic life in the 21st century. It is used primarily in service of language learning and teaching. In the teaching of reading, technology supports a multitude of approaches to help learners of different levels of language ability to master certain aspects of comprehension. Warschauer (2001) writes that digital media has changed reading practices, giving rise to new literacies incorporating synchronous and asynchronous learning. Thus, the computer is no longer an optional tool but rather an essential medium of language use. For the current generation of ESL students, growing up surrounded by technology does not ensure they will be effective readers. They still need assistance in developing ESL reading skills. This is especially so with the ESL vocabulary knowledge which is widely held to be the primary factor in ESL reading comprehension. For example, Abraham (2008) found that computer-mediated vocabulary learning was most effective for intermediate-level learners.

In their study, Chun and Nation (2006) suggested the use of image-based annotations for ESL vocabulary learning. These were seen to be helpful, particularly in combination with text-based annotations. In contrast, Sakar and Ercetin (2005) saw that the students in their reading comprehension study preferred visual representations significantly more than textual or audio representations. Both these studies imply the importance of training students to use online reading materials. It is wrong to assume that students know how to use these resources or that teachers can let them rely on their own resources (Hubbard, 2009). While many studies on learning reading online focused on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension, too few studies have looked into how online programs can be effectively used for academic reading.

English for academic reading grew out of a broader field of ESP (English for Specific Purpose). It is defined by its focus on teaching English specifically to facilitate learners' study or research through the medium of English (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Mediocre skills and the lack of motivation in academic reading have seen many undergraduates struggling to handle their academic work. Recent statistics show that the Malaysian universities have spent millions of ringgit on training programs yearly particularly on enhancing the ESL communicative skills of students (Shakir, 2009; Wong & Hamali, 2006, Teo, 2008) In Malaysia, youth and graduate unemployment are emerging issues that need to be tackled fast. Unemployment rates among these categories are very much higher than the national average (Malaysian Institute of Economic Research, 2014). What remains a prominent problem for many of these graduates is their poor language communicative ability which has impeded their employability chances (Nor Aslah Adzmi, 2009; Ismail, Hussin & Darus, 2012b). Their problem in communication can be traced to the lack of language input. Even if they have managed to become gainfully employed, many of them struggle to become truly competent in these skills, prompting their employers to send them for adequate training (Noriah Ismail & Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri, 2012)

Since the present work environment has become more virtual and technology- dependent, the nature of learning and training have also moved from the traditional face- to-face mode to a web-based, autonomous and self-directed training environment (Horton, 2001; Muhamad & Idris, 2004; Ismail, Hussin & Darus, 2012c). ELET offers learners' flexibility to develop academic reading skills in terms of time and learning pace. It offers programs for language input skills that are imperative for academic work in language as well as content classes. With well- developed reading skills, graduates, are able to better handle tasks in English and to perform well in both their speaking and writing skills. Graduates who fail to do so will have a difficult time to get hired (Nor Aziah Alias, Haziah Jamaludin & Salemah Ismail. 2001; Wan Zumusni, 2007; Noriah Ismail, Deepak Singh Ratan Singh, Suhaidi Elias & Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri, 2015).

In a nationwide survey on graduates' skills requirements, in terms of the training program content, Muhamad and Idris (2004) reported that communication or language is below 5% while most courses are on technical skills (30%), motivation and self- improvement (22%) and education information and general knowledge (15%). Therefore, there is a need to develop an e-training program module for academic reading which provides the necessary ESL training for academic reading skills for undergraduates. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the readiness of students to learn academic reading through an online resource and the extent to which online programs such as ELET would be able to enhance the academic reading skills of fresh graduates.

### **3. The Study**

The main objective of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the English Language E-Training (ELET) Reading Module for Enhancing the reading skills of unemployed graduates via the use of a Learning Management System (LMS). In addition, the study also looks at the participants' readiness and reception towards ELET reading module.

ELET is an ESP e-training program developed to enhance ESL skills of BBA fresh and unemployed graduates. The online reading module was tested on 30 unemployed BBA students from Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor, Malaysia who have taken ELC 500 course (English for Academic Reading) as ELC500 is the prerequisite for ELET. Of that number, about 90 percent of the 30 participants were females and almost 10 percent, males. All of the participants were 23 years and above. The research consists of a pre- test, the application of the ELET Reading Module and a post-test. In this present study, ELET Reading Module was being used as a supplementary course. Through autonomous learning or self-directed learning skills, the participants applied their previous knowledge and experience in this ELET Reading Module consisting of five units including sections on

1) Skimming and Scanning, 2) Interpreting meaning of words, 3) Identifying main ideas and supporting details, 4) Making inferences and drawing conclusions and 5) Assessing the text by determining its composition of facts and opinions. All units include online learning practices with links as well as web-based resources and materials. The units were created to help students to master academic reading skills that is necessary for the graduates to achieve a language competence at a commendable level.

The tests, which were graded upon 30 marks, consisted of two reading passages and a total of fourteen questions in both close and open-ended forms. The questions tested the students' fundamental academic reading skills taught in the course. A survey questionnaire were administered which are the Pre-Survey before the treatment was deployed to gather data on the students' perception of the online module as well as their readiness towards e-training. Their learning experience were evaluated quantitatively to learn the trend in their learning styles and preferences.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 Findings from the Pre and Post Tests**

To find out if there was any significant difference in the students' pre-test and post-test reading scores, a T-test for paired sample was conducted. Firstly, as shown in Table 1, the mean post test score, 5.6. (N=30, SD 1.0372) was higher than the mean pre- test score, 5.167 (N=30, SD 1.1472). The results showed that there was not a significant increase between the pre-test and post-test.

**Table 1 : RR1 and RR2 mean scores**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 pretest	5.167	30	1.1472	.2095
posttest	5.600	30	1.0372	.1894

As displayed in Table 2, the estimated correlation coefficient showed that there was a positive linear relationship between the scores of RR1 and RR2 at 40.6%. A further analysis showed a p-value of 0.026, implying a significant relationship between RR1 and RR2 at the 0.05 level.

**Table 2 : Paired Samples Correlation between RR1 and RR2**

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 pretest & posttest	30	.406	.026

Finally, the results of the paired samples test presented in Table 3 showed a p-value of 0.056 ( $p > 0.05$ ) thus indicating the difference in the pre-test and post-test scores was barely significant. However, at the 0.10 level, the difference in the pretest and post test scores was significant.

**Table 3 : Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 pretest - posttest	-.4333	1.1943	.2181	-.8793	.0126	-1.987	29	.056

## 4.2 Findings from the Survey

For this study a survey questionnaires was carried out to determine their reasons and interest for e-training particularly the ELET reading module. Furthermore, the analysis seeks to discover the participants' readiness for e- training program in general and their perception of a good ESL e-training module for BBA graduates. All 30 graduates took part in the survey.

Data from Sections A, B, and C of the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) and presented in frequency counts and percentages. Responses to the open-ended questions in Section C were read, interpreted and put into common themes.

Both data were used together to give a holistic view of the outcome of the analysis.

The qualitative data of the questionnaire were carefully read, analyzed and categorized into common themes. The analysis was done by counting the explicit mentions of a) Participants' learning styles b) reasons why improving English proficiency was crucial to gaining employment c) how learning English especially the academic reading skill online could be beneficial to the respondents and d) what are the other important ESL skills needed by BBA graduates. Salient themes that emerged from the analysis were then used to form a comprehensive description of the respondents' perceptions and expectations towards online language learning. The findings are presented in the following paragraphs with anecdotal evidence.

As this investigation is a part of a larger study, only a selection of the findings are discussed. For the purpose of this paper, only the three top reasons or statements that the respondents gave are presented. Reliability statistics was run to check the reliability of the questionnaire items and it returned a Cronbach's Alpha value of .858 (Table 4).

**Table 4: Reliability**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.858	36

Section A reports on the extent of the students' knowledge regarding several computer applications (Table 5). Of all the applications mentioned, the responses with the three highest means were MS Word (mean 4.1220), games (4.0732) and LMS or learning management systems (3.8293).

**Table 5 : Extent of Knowledge of Computer Applications**

	MSWord	MSExcel	MSAccess	SPSS	Search	LMS	Email	Utility	Games
N	41	41	41	41	41	41	41	41	41
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.1220	3.2927	3.0976	2.6585	3.6098	3.8293	3.7317	3.7561	4.0732

### 4.3 Learning Styles

In Section B, the respondents were asked to respond to several statements relating to how they learnt online. The three top statements are presented. From figure 1, the findings showed that the majority of them (80%) were exposed to the Internet and some amount of learning using the computer in school. A big majority (75%) felt that they study better when they can discuss with their peers. Finally, close to two thirds (66%) of the respondents like to do autonomous learning with some help from their lecturers.



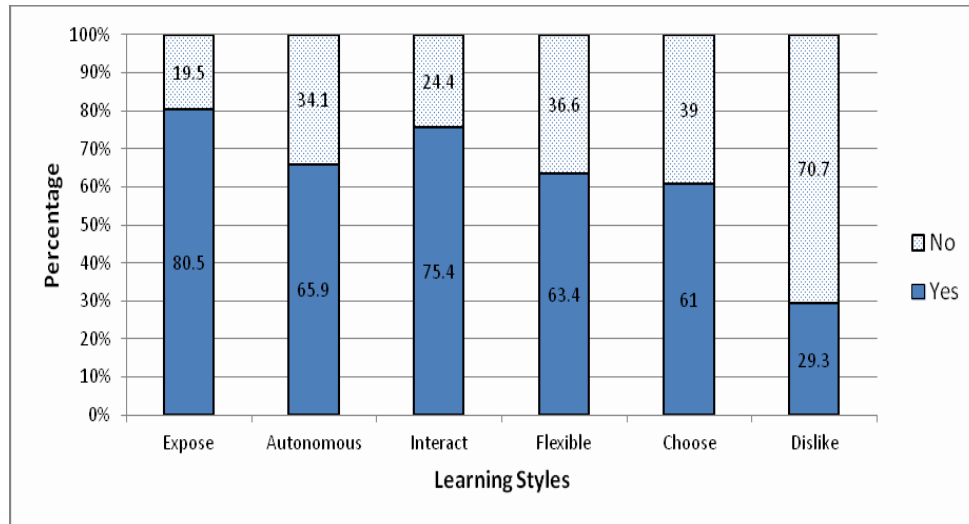


Figure 1: Learning styles

#### 4.4 Reasons for choosing to join ESL online course

In Section C, the students were asked to respond to several reasons why they would choose to learn ESL online (Figure 2). Here again, the three top reasons are presented. A majority of them (70.7%) agreed that they would do so to be more proficient in the language. The second top reason was that online learning will give them the opportunity to learn something new (66%). Finally, 61% agreed that one strong reason why they would join an online course was that they can become more independent or autonomous.

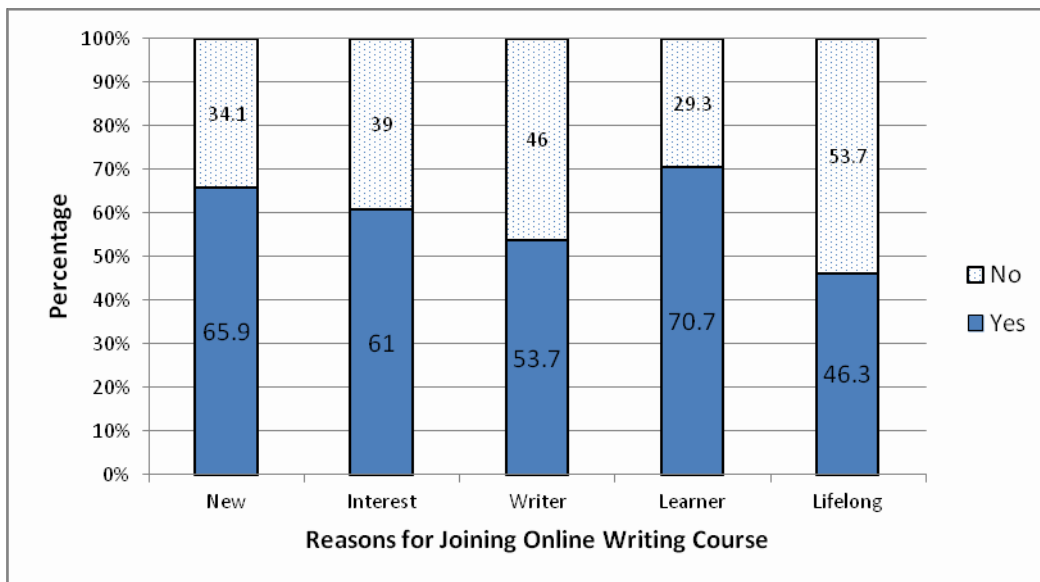


Figure 2 : Reasons for Interest in joining ESL online Course

In Question E1, the respondents were asked to explain how improving their Business English is important in getting a job. The responses given by the respondents were mostly related to expectations of 1) the interview 2) the nature of the industry 3) the potential employer. The majority of the respondents agreed that proficiency was a requirement for employment and that they had to show that they were proficient during job interviews. This deduction was made based on some of the following (unedited) excerpts from the respondents:

“...this is the way to increase our chance to get the job” (respondent #13) “..it is [a] requirement for any jobs.” (respondent #17)

“..this is for the interview” (respondent #22)

In fact, one respondent felt that proficiency would help him gain an edge over other candidates: “..this is a way to make ourselves more valuable than other [candidates]” (respondent #25)

Good knowledge of the English Language is also seen as important especially in the nature of the business industry. The respondents clearly understood that if they were applying for a position in a business company, they needed to be proficient:

“..English is important for international business” (respondent #9)

“..[English] is an important medium of communication business” (respondent #11)

In relation to the third issue, the employer, the respondents felt that having some level of ESL proficiency, particularly Business English is important in securing a job as it is the expectation of their employers. Some of them said:

“..employers usually set [certain] standards” (respondent #15)

“..employers only accept fluent English in writing and presentation” (respondent #13)

“..employers and clients are usually impressed [with good English]” “..it would help in communicating with the staff and customers” (respondent #10)

“...it shows no fear, and more confidence to deal with clients and management” (respondent #25)

Other comments given by the respondents gave insights into how they perceived learning Business English online would help them. In Question E2, the respondents were asked

to explain how they see learning English online or e-training would bring them benefits. Their responses are related to learning independence and can be categorized under

1) flexibility 2) confidence 3) technology skills and 4) managing resources. In relation to the first category, flexibility, the respondents felt that e-training will give them some amount of leeway to work on what they like at their own pace. Some of them wrote:

“..I will be free to learn anytime and anywhere” (respondent #17)

“..I can get more opportunity to enhance proficiency” (respondent #21)

Under the next category, the respondents viewed that ESP e-training will give them the opportunity to build better confidence. It can be said that the nature of online learning put respondents in a position where they can make their own decisions regarding their learning. In other words, respondents move to the next task or level only when they have gained some confidence to do so:

“..I am more confident especially when [learning] presentation skills” (respondent #19)

Under the category “technology skills”, the respondents support ESP e-training as the accepted way to learn and is suitable with their level of technological prowess:

“..we can learn pronunciation and vocabulary online” (respondent #29) “..we can now read online newspapers and journals” (respondent #18) “..Internet is the best resource for learning” (respondent #16)

Furthermore, the respondents believed that ESP e-training can help them manage their resources better in terms of time and cost:

“..I can save time and money through online learning” (respondent #9)

Finally, the respondents assert that the ESP e-training module feel that ELET is a very good e-training module for Business graduates particularly its academic reading module. The participants also suggest that module include academic writing skills such as report writing, proposal writing and presentation skills. This is because the respondents felt that these are also the important skills that they lack.

“...ESP skills which I need the most include academic writing, report as well as proposal writing as they can help me secure a good job” (respondent #7)

“...I lack certain ESP skills such as presentation and communication skills so I would love to learn and master them via online.” (respondent #14)

“...a good e-training course must have modules on how to write a good proposal or report because most graduates are still not good at them including me and also presentation skill.” (respondent #23)

The main finding of the study revealed that ELET Reading module is able to significantly enhance BBA fresh graduates' academic reading skill. The study indicates the participants' high interest towards ELET Reading module. In addition, the participants revealed their readiness and positive perception towards e-training program. This finding supports the study conducted by Noriah Ismail, Supyan Hussin and Saadiyah Darus (2012) which indicated favorable view regarding ESL online program for UiTM students' and their need to improve their academic writing skills via online. In addition, the findings also lend support to Fang's (2010) study which investigates 45 EFL learners' perceptions of an English language computer-assisted online program known as *MyAcces*, which revealed the benefits the online writing tool in enhancing the learners' motivation and shows that it is a useful support tool for an ESP online course.

## 5. Conclusion

The study highlights the importance of providing a suitable and effective ESP E-Training program to fresh and unemployed graduates in order to sharpen and enhance their ESL skills. It is interesting to note that fresh graduates' main reason or interest in joining an e-training program points to the module that can cater their learning styles. More importantly, the study is significant as it takes into account the fresh graduates' ESP e-training needs and provides them with the right kind of skills based on their particular need which is academic reading, as very few other studies conducted on ESL graduates have focused on them. The result of this research is useful for designing an online training program especially for academic reading skills.

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