

UTILISATION OF EBOOK IN A COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH COURSE

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'UTILISATION OF EBOOK IN A COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH COURSE: ESL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS'

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Abstract

The integration of ebooks in the classroom is widely applied in various disciplines, especially in developing countries. The practice of ebooks offers students, teachers, and institutions a supplementary medium or instruction tool that can support or enhance the learning process. Resources are made accessible by educators to encourage students to use them, especially those at the tertiary education level. The resources provide an opportunity for teachers to share interactive teaching inputs and exercises with students. This paper explores how English as Second Language Learning (ESL) learners in a TVET institution perceived the use of ebooks in enhancing and supporting their learning of a Communicative English course module. In this study, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was used as the lens to explore the perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and attitude toward using ebooks substituting the traditional textbook in the classroom. Students from four semester-three classes were requested to respond to two open-ended questions concerning ebooks' usefulness and ease of use in learning the ESL course. A total of 80 students participated in this study and responded to the questions. The responses generated from the students revealed their agreement on the affordances of the ebook as a potential tool to support and enhance their learning. However, most of them mentioned the shortcomings of the accessibility of technology and internet stability. These indicate that for an ebook to be fully utilized by ESL learners, it is essential for the institution to improve its technology and internet facilities.

Keyword: Electronic book (ebook), ESL, Second language learning, Polytechnic, TVET

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

Education worldwide highlights the development of information, communication, and technology (ICT) skills alongside other 21st-century abilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration that students need to succeed in their careers in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era. The 4IR represents a fundamental change in how we live, work, and relate to one another, enabled by extraordinary technological advances commensurate with those of the first, second, and third industrial revolutions (World Economic Forum, 2021). The utilisation of technology such as ebooks in classrooms today is a trend in lieu of the imperative for learning institutions to comprehend 21st-century teaching and learning where educators facilitate students to learn and live productively in a global society. Politeknik Port Dickson Strategic Plan 2021-2025 (4:leading the education system through TVET 4.0), in line with Malaysia's National

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E-learning Policy (DePAN), (MOHE, 2011) and the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) have been swiftly extending the use of multimedia technology to particularly enhance the quality of learning among polytechnic students to develop the knowledge and skills students need to function productively in the 21st century and the 4IR era. In response to this aspiration, the English Language Unit (ELU) of Politeknik Port Dickson introduced the use of ebook; a book that has been converted to digital form and could be read on a computer, usually through network services (Lee, 2002), in its ESL teaching and learning context in 2019. The ebook replaces printed course modules that the students had used for years.

1.2 Problem Statement

Scholars like Hemon et al. (2006) and Annamalai (2016) suggest that as books that have been converted to digital forms and can be read on a computer and network services (Lee, 2002), ebooks offer a range of advantages to students as they simplify students' learning experience. Gone are the days when students had to fill their bags with files and books and carry them daily to classrooms and back home or hostel. With ebooks entering the educational domain, one device or application is enough to include the entire semester's syllabus. Other scholars suggest that advantages of using ebooks in teaching and learning a particular subject include ease of use, accessibility and searching capabilities, mobility, saving of physical space, convenience, saving time and money (Casey, 1994; Shiratuddin et al., 2003; Hemon et al., 2006; Lam et al., 2009; Rosso, 2009; Annamalai et al., 2014; Annamalai, 2016). Ebooks also enhance students' overall learning experience, as integrating ebooks into classroom teaching makes learning fun and engaging, as it helps students learn better and faster (Casey, 1994; Simon, 2002 & Wilson, 2003). Furthermore, its usage will develop students' 21st-century abilities, namely technological competencies, and communicative skills, as intended by the course module.

However, the development of 21st-century abilities in students could be affected if they need help understanding the meaning of the shift from using printed learning units to ebooks and utilising their ebooks effectively. Studies also reported challenges, as not all students feel comfortable with the technology (Wilson, 2003; Sharma, 2009; Zayed Ahmed, 2014; Boakye, 2017; Isibika & Kavishe, 2018). For instance, compared with reading paper-based text, some students find reading long text on a small computer screen tiring, less efficient, and even 'painful' (Wilson, 2003, p. 11), and the poor navigational controls on ebooks are argued as "awkward, difficult or time-consuming to use" (p. 14). Therefore, there is a need for this study to be carried out in our context to enable us to understand how our students perceive the use of ebooks they used in learning a particular English language course.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

Students taking Communicative English courses no longer use printed learning units of their communicative English course module since the introduction of ebooks in 2019. Based on the problem statement which has been stated above, we conducted this study to understand the students' utilisation of ebooks in their learning context by exploring their views regarding the advantages and issues of using the ebooks and suggesting possible improvement actions.

1.4 Research Question(s)

The two research questions that have guided this study are:

- i. *How do students perceive the use of ebook in their learning context?*

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ii. *What are the challenges faced by the students in using the ebook in their learning context?*

1.5 Significance of the research/study

The findings of this study will be redound to the students and teaching staff of the institution, particularly the English Language Unit (ELU), as the participants' data revealed the need to improve the content and presentation of the ebook to support the use of the technology in its teaching and learning context. The ELU will be able to make room for improvement and innovation concerning the construction of the contents of ebooks based on the responses given by the participants. This research will help us as the researchers and educators of the institution to uncover critical areas in the educational field that have not been explored in our unique context.

1.6 Limitations of Research/Study

This study used only one type of data-generating instrument, which was open-ended questions. This means, our investigation relied heavily on students' words and not actions due to constraints, namely time and safety, i.e. the Movement Control Order (MCO) 1.0, which was imposed for months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not allowing us to observe how the students use the ebook in their classrooms to triangulate and verify the findings generated from the open-ended questions.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Terms

Ebooks are "text in digital form, or digital reading material, or a book in a computer file format, or an electronic file of words and images" (Rao, 2003, pp. 86–87). Lee (2002) also included the definitions of an ebook from the Hi-Tech Dictionary and The New Concise Oxford English Dictionary respectively as a book that has been converted to digital form and could be read on a computer, usually through network services or CD-ROM. While Cox and Mohammed, as quoted by Lee (2002), an "ebooks is a term used to describe a text analogous to a book that is in digital form to be displayed on a computer".

In addition, Wilson, 2001 cited by Abd Mutalib et. al., (2012) stated that hardware, often known as 'a reader', software, and ebook files, are the three fundamental parts of an ebook. Hardware-based ebook readers are portable electronic gadgets made primarily for reading publications of any kind. The pricing range is determined by the quality that the ebook readers portray. Ebook readers have the storage space to hold several books' worth of content, which can be virtually accessed from anywhere. Moreover, a good ebook reader will be able to do things like print, play music and video, interact with touch screens, and even communicate wirelessly. Pereus (2000) in Abd Mutalib et. al. further explained that software-based ebook readers are applications that show an e-data Book's on a device. Examples of this software include Adobe Acrobat Reader, Microsoft Reader, and Adobe Acrobat ebook Reader. Software-based readers have the benefit of providing additional features through a keyboard and larger screen sizes in addition to the features of dedicated readers (Lynch, 2001). Because users can alter the display's settings using the keyboard utilities, this might provide easier access to the information. A file with an embedded signature is referred to as a file type. The operating system is informed of how to handle that file. By looking at the file extension at the end of the file name, a user can determine what kind of file an ebook is that they have.

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Table 1 lists some examples of the most popular file types used for ebooks:

ebook files types
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plain ASCII text files have the extension .txt • Microsoft Word files have the extension .doc • Adobe acrobat files have the extension .pdf • Html files have the extension .html or .htm • Adobe eBook files have the extension .pdf

2.2 Advantages of Ebook in Educational Settings

Ebooks can present any auditory or visual materials – including speech, text, music, animations, photographs, or videos – alone or in different combinations. ebooks can link different representations, such as pictures with sounds, oral readings with written text, videos with subtitles, or other combinations that could reinforce teaching and learning (Casey, 1994). Scholars have contrary views about the value of academic ebooks. Advocates such as Lemken (1999) argued that technology should "fill the gulf between printed and digital information" (p. 4). A number of advantages have been widely claimed to be associated with this form of technology. Hermon et al. (2006) named a few advantages, such as convenience, economy, portability, and more up-to-date materials. Shiratuddin et al. (2003) stated that students could build their personalised digital libraries. Lam, Lam, and McNaught (2010) mentioned several advantages of using ebooks: access to more readings, remote access, searchable readings, potential links to allied multimedia resources, portable resources, and optimising reading time (e.g., during travel). Also, empirical evidence indicates that once students can connect to technology, they read faster (Wilson, 2003) and enjoy it (Simon, 2002). Isaacson, S. A. (2017) reported that though most ebook participants in his study had not previously used ebooks for learning, they reported preferring them over paper texts after the reading sessions were completed. The study's findings support the incorporation of ebooks in ESL curricula.

The success of the ebooks technology seems to depend heavily on the ease of the reading process. Malama, Landoni and Wilson (2004) discovered that users regard the ease of navigation through a clear user interface, and a clear and logical structure to support readers' sense of place in the ebooks and layout of the ebooks on screen as a strong motivating force; also are important. The optimal use of screen real estate is even more important with mobile ebooks than with laptops or desktop computers. Wilson, Landoni and Gibb (2002) used the book metaphor as a crucial design feature, including having a cover, a table of contents, a consistent and tidy typographic style, simple classification of book sections, and cues for reading progress.

Ebooks have extensive features such as page turning, scrolling of text, and searching. More advanced ebooks-related functionalities are constantly being developed. Wilson (2003), gathered user feedback on using ebooks, found that users appreciate a quick and accurate search function, an annotation function, and the inclusion of hypertexts and dictionaries on the reader. Lam, Lam and McNaught (2009) evaluated the perceived usefulness of the functionalities on four popular ebooks readers on the market which can be used on PCs and PPCs and found them, in general, to be acceptable.

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Ebooks are downloadable and portable if they are stored in light portable devices such as tablets or smartphones. The usability issue relates to the practicality of the various procedures required to use the software and hardware and the ease of use of the technology. It relates to issues such as interface design that facilitates effective human-computer interaction (Wilson et al., 2002).

2.3 Issues in Using ebooks

Nevertheless, there are also negative revelations to using the technology in the academic setting. Not all students feel comfortable with technology. For instance, some students find reading long text on a small computer screen tiring, less efficient, and even 'painful' (Wilson, 2003, p. 11) compared with reading paper-based text. Wilson (2003) also reported complaints about the ineffective navigational controls on ebooks readers as being "awkward, difficult or time-consuming to use" (p. 14).

Several studies found that scholars experience problems in accessing e-resources. These include a lack of awareness of e-resources and information retrieval and searching skills (Kumar & Kumar, 2010; Chauhan & Mahajan, 2014; Isibika & Kavishe, 2018); poor information technology infrastructure (especially in the developing world), such as limited access to computers, unstable network connectivity and slow download speeds (Sharma, 2009; Zabed Ahmed, 2014; Boakye, 2017; Isibika & Kavishe, 2018); and limited access to e-resources, including limited access to relevant titles and contents on specific subjects (Zabed Ahmed, 2013).

2.4 Ways To Improve The Usage

One of the factors that can help boost the access and use of ebooks, particularly in school and university settings, is the existence of support from the management on the introduction and use of ebooks. As shown in the literature, some examples of such support are by financing paid subscriptions of ebooks (Wendo & Mwanzu, 2016) or by providing fast and reliable internet access, which can be a big hurdle to ebooks adoption in developing countries (Leonard & Snyman, 2019) (over generalised – need to address within our own TVET content).

¹ ebooks could expand over print media by adding several specific features such as hypertext links, search and cross-reference functions and multimedia and an electronic version of a printed book that can be read on a Personal Computer or handheld device designed specifically for this purpose.

The use of technology in education has become necessary to fortify the teaching and learning experience in the 21st century. Throughout the years, we have seen dramatic changes and experienced transitions that have moved forward computer hardware and software, along with web-based technologies, towards instruction. Most of all, we have experienced dramatic changes in educational interests and the ways to teach different generations.

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3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

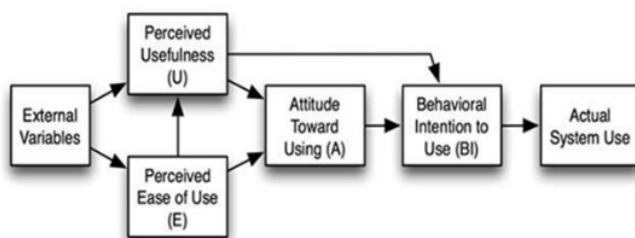


Figure 1: Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989)

We were inspired by Davis' Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as a lens that guided our investigation from the beginning until the end. This model suggests that when users are presented with new technology, several factors influence their decision about how and when they will use it, notably: Perceived usefulness (PU) – Davis defined this as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance." It means whether or not someone perceives that technology to be useful for what they want to do. Perceived ease-of-use (PEOU) – Davis defined this as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort." If the technology is easy to use, then the barriers are conquered. No one has a positive attitude towards it if it is not easy to use and the interface is complicated. External variables such as social influence are essential in determining the attitude. When these things (TAM) are in place, people will have the attitude and intention to use the technology. However, the perception may change depending on age and gender because everyone is different.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative approach has been chosen for this study in order for us to answer the research questions above effectively. Based on the reviewed literature, most studies investigating phenomena related to beliefs and perceptions toward technology in teaching and learning employ qualitative research (Johnson, 1994; Bigatel, 2007; Md. Yunus, 2007; Alabaikan, 2010; Attia, 2011; Ahmad Busra, 2020). Qualitative methods are suitable to be employed in this study to effectively understand the phenomena (in this case, the ESL students' perceptions of the use of ebook in their learning context) where little is known or when the researchers intend to identify the variables that might later be tested statistically (quantitatively) (Hoepfl, 1997). The approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in the investigation and a comprehensive analysis of the contextual complexities involved. We generated our data for this study qualitatively using two open-ended questions, which were then distributed to 80 semester 3 students in Politeknik Port Dickson. They wrote their responses to 2 open-ended questions, which were created on Google Form.

3.3 Analysis of Data

The link to the open-ended questions was sent to students' groups on Whatsapp. We then analysed all the data using six steps adapted from Braun and Clark's Thematic Analysis (2006) approach (Figure 2) as our analytical framework (Figure 3). The processes involved familiarising ourselves with our data and generating initial codes after generating an initial list of ideas about what was in and interesting about the data. This was followed by searching for suitable sub-themes when all data had been initially coded and collated. Next, we reviewed and refined the sub-themes generated in step three by defining and naming the sub-themes and putting them under the elements of TAM; Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU). They were then further refined and put under the overarching themes of "Advantages" and "Challenges". Finally, we wrote the report findings once we had a set of fully worked-out data.

**PHASES OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS
(ADAPTED FROM BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006)**

PHASES	DESCRIPTION OF ANALYSIS PROCESS
1 Familiarising myself with data	i) Narrative preparation, i.e. transcribing data ii) (Re-)reading the data and noting down initial ideas
2 Generating initial codes	i) Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across entire data set ii) Collating data relevant to each code
3 Searching for themes	i) Collating codes into potential themes ii) Gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4 Reviewing themes	i) Checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts ii) Checking if themes work in relation to the entire data set iii) Reviewing data to search for additional themes iv) Generating a thematic "map" of the analysis
5 Defining and naming themes	i) On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells ii) Generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6 Producing the report	i) Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples ii) Final analysis of selected extracts iii) Relating the analysis back to the research question, objectives and previous literature reviewed

Figure 2: Braun and Clark's Thematic Analysis (2006)

2006



Figure 3: Analytical Framework

The following are the phases involved in our data collection methods:

Phase 1: Data familiarisation

The raw data gathered from students' responses (figure 4) were read and re-read. At the same time, initial ideas about each response were noted down in 'memoing,' i.e., the act of recording reflective notes about what the researcher is learning from the data. See our notes about each response in the blue column in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The Raw Data

Phase 2 and 3: Generating initial codes and searching for themes

After initial codes were generated, we continued searching for themes, informed and guided by our literature review. Students' responses were mainly short and precise and, thus, were already in the form of 'codes.' For easy coding, initial themes are coloured 'purple' and 'red.'

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

We continuously checked if the themes worked in relation to the codes and the entire data set. The data set was continuously reviewed (Figure 5) to search for additional themes, generating the thematic "map" of the analysis (Phase 5).

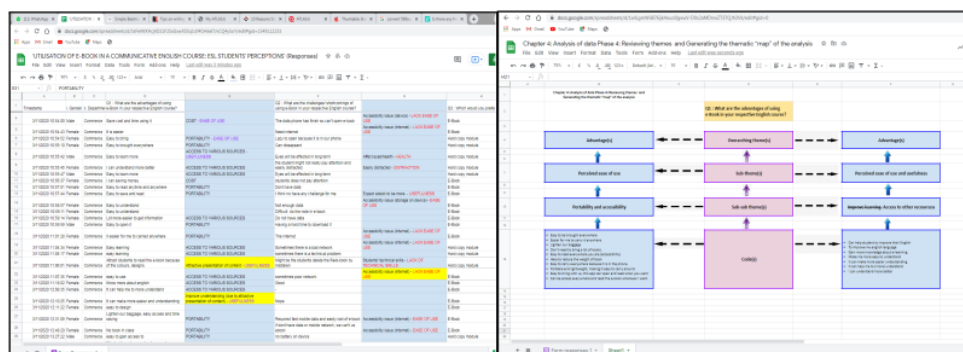


Figure 5: Creating Sub-themes

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Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

After capturing the essence of what each theme is about and what aspect of the data each theme captures, we officially named our themes. Names given to the themes are concise and immediately give the reader a sense of the theme. After continuous revision of the themes in relation to our data, we were able to produce a final thematic map and describe each theme in sentences.



Figure 6: Themes Naming

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of this study in two categories: advantages and challenges regarding the usefulness and ease of use of ebooks that emerged from the analysis of the responses gathered.

4.1 Advantages

This study results reveal that students perceived utilisation of ebooks as advantageous, thus agreeing with Simon, 2002, Wilson (2003), Shiratuddin et al (2003), Hernon et al (2006), Lam et al (2009), Lam, Lam & McNaught (2010) and Isaacson, S. A. (2017). Reading ebooks has many advantages, and their usage is ever-increasing. Some prefer traditional printed books, but there is also a growing audience whose lifestyle and taste are suited to ebooks.

Half the participants said they would use an electronic book for studies; half said they would not. Those who said they would, cite reasons such as portability and advantages of the electronic medium such as hypertext and searchability, which lead to a better understanding of the subject content. Those who said they would not use an electronic book as a module gave reasons such as price, poor battery life, and weight; several users felt that portable electronic books offer no advantages over print or reading from a PC.

In some situations, reading ebooks is more effective than reading hard copies. Most of Politeknik's books are technical texts. As a result, many documents are long and, thus, heavy to carry around, bad for the environment if we print them, and challenging to handle. Moreover, the students do not necessarily need to read an entire book in many cases, as using ebooks gives them numerous advantages. For example, they can quickly search and find keywords in a text and close and open it again quickly.

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The students who participated in the study were divided in their opinions on whether students would find an ebooks device useful. Those who believed students would use ebooks gave the following reasons - respondents' data is gathered and categorized into five sub-themes:

Portability

The delivery of ebooks is virtually instantaneous; without getting up from their chairs, the students may quickly buy, download, and begin reading them. They do not have to wait for the physical books to arrive in the mail for days, weeks, or even longer, nor having to go to a bookshop to purchase them. ebooks are smaller in size, thus they do not require a room or a library. On their computer or reading device, thousands of ebooks can be saved. In addition, hundreds of books can be transported on a CD, laptop, smartphone, or any reader without being weighed down. Some respondents said they could read ebooks anywhere, on the bus, train, airport, and even while waiting in a class.

Accessibility

Our respondents further explained that links are available in ebooks for quick access to associated websites and further information. An ebook allows them to quickly search for any information without having to turn each page. By clicking on the hyperlinks given in texts, students can be redirected to the section they looked up. The traditional Table of Content with index numbering in a printed book is no longer required in an ebook. Moreover, there are no packing and shipping costs because ebooks are supplied online. Since ebooks are printable, students mentioned that they could easily and cheaply print them at home or any printing facility around the campus if they prefer to read an eBook the old-fashioned way.

Cost-effective

The cost of delivering book publications to their intended audience is the crucial distinction between ebooks and published books. Evidently, the total absence of printing, paper, and binding from the process of making ebooks, cuts costs. Selling ebooks online is more economical because there is no need for inventory or shelf space at sales locations, which soon will include kiosks. According to new research, as ebooks become more popular, distributors and merchants' percentage of the retail price will likely fall dramatically ("Economics of ebooks: What You Save, What You Stand to Gain - IBPA Independent," 2014).

Environmental friendly

Without a doubt, few of our respondents quoted this to be the most prominent advantage of reading electronic books. Millions of trees are cut each year to produce books and newspapers that are still printed on paper. Choosing ebooks over traditional printed books is essential if we want to avoid this. Although ebooks need resources to run properly, they are not harmful to the environment and the trees.

Attractive interface

Interactive ebooks that include audio, video, and animations can strengthen the author's intended message. Respondents feel it is a bonus point to ebooks over the traditional printed book to be embedded with interactive features such as YouTube videos, GIF moving pictures and icons, hyperlinks, QR codes, and other engaging elements.

4.2 Challenges

The results of this study also reveal downsides to overcome when it comes to ebooks' wide publication, thus agreeing with Wilson (2003), Sharma (2009), Zayed Ahmed (2014), Boakye (2017), (Isibika & Kavishe, 2018), Kumar and Kumar, (2010), Chauhan and Mahajan (2014), and Isibika & Kavishe (2018). If ebooks are to become widely accepted, many of the advances in technology discussed above are not yet mature, and some of the advantages bring their inherent problems. The problems of ebooks publishing do not apply uniformly to all platforms, formats, or groups. The obstacles to ebooks publication can be broken down into resistance to change, font issues, and digital rights management.

Resistance to change

While futuristic technology, new smartphones, and latest gadgets bring excitement, for some, they would just prefer to keep things classic. Many, if not most, people avoid making changes in their core habits. They may try something new for a period of time, but rarely look forward to adopting radical changes in the way they do things. Reading ebooks is one of those kinds of changes. Instead of a traditional paper-based book that readers can see and feel, ebooks are an electronic medium. They have no physical representation where you can exclusively store them in a bookshelf or mini library in your house. Ebooks are often kept in one's smartphone or tablet which is used for all different purposes and functions. We multitask things using our phone. From sending and receiving email, checking and updating social media platforms, paying bills, doing shopping, booking travel itineraries, keeping receipts, to scribbling important lecture notes, thus, leaving no personal sentiment for the stored ebooks. The act of reading is altered. No more turning pages, now it is scrolling. Some reading apps come with the feature of trying to approximate the current experience by adding the sound of a paper page turning when you move from one page to the next, simply to minimize the jarring difference of the new experience. The very enhancements that make ebooks a potentially superior reading experience may simply turn off people from switching.

Font Issues

Fonts are both an advantage and a disadvantage for ebooks. The ability to resize fonts to fit the needs of the vision-impaired reader is an advantage. However, fonts on a computer screen at sizes equal to those used in printed materials are not as easy on the eyes. The difference in the quality of fonts can lead to eye strain when reading ebooks. Typography is another font problem faced by ebooks. Some ebooks formats allow text to be reformatted to fit the physical dimensions of the ebooks reader. For many types of content, this is an advantage. But in some books, the way text is arranged on the page is part of the message of the book.

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According to Stork Paul P. (The Problems of eBook Publishing, n.d.-b), one of the main issues when releasing books in digital form is copyright protection for authors. When copiers were widely accessible, similar worries were voiced regarding conventional publications. Although it is now possible to duplicate a whole book, the expense and inconvenience of doing it manually have limited this sort of piracy. If ebooks are to flourish, there must be a way to distribute them safely while protecting the authors' copyrights and profits. Microsoft, Xerox, and Adobe are just a handful of the businesses tackling this issue right now.

3 5.0 CONCLUSION

This study suggests that when ESL students are presented with a new technology such as ebooks, several factors influence their decision about how and when to use it in their learning context. For us to encourage them to continue utilizing the ebooks and increase the effectiveness of the implementation of ebooks in their context, the English Language Unit (ELU) team needs to sit together to identify issues and work on the factors that act as barriers to the implementation. This could be achieved by providing specific guidelines that the lecturers could refer to every time they encounter some problems and by conducting several relevant professional development sessions, particularly at the beginning of the semester, to provide technological and pedagogical knowledge for effective implementation. For future research, we would suggest developing suitable materials for the ebook, focusing on the TVET instructors.

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