

Military Learning Environment: The Use of MyLinE for Language Learning at the Defence University

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Abstract: This study aims to answer questions on how students at the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM) utilises My Learning in English or MyLinE for English language learning. Particularly, this study focuses on one of the tools in MyLinE which are student forums. Findings suggest that students at the NDUM are not aware of how the forums could have assisted them to improve their English proficiency. As a free online language support system available to all public institutes of higher learning in Malaysia, it appears that students at the Defence University resist MyLinE because of several reasons.

Key words: MyLinE, computer assisted language learning, online learning, online forums, National Defence University Malaysia, English language

INTRODUCTION

English language is accepted worldwide as an international language. The demands of the language range from administration to business and education to leisure. In Malaysia, English is treated as a second language (Omar, 1992). In line with this status, English language is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary level of education. In fact, some tertiary education providers in Malaysia adopt English as their medium of instruction for classroom teaching and learning. The main concern of the government on English language acquisition is mainly because the graduates of the higher learning institutions fail to communicate effectively and competently using English (Mohd Khaled Nordin, Minister of Higher Education Malaysia). Various strategies are actively employed to ensure that this challenge is addressed and one of those strategies is through an online language support programme.

My Learning in English or MyLinE is a language support programme funded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) and it is utilised by all public universities in the country. Initiated by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), MyLinE uses Moodle as the Learning Management System. It is argued by many scholars that the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in teaching and learning could improve students' understanding of concepts to be learnt. While MyLinE page for the defence university students which is called English Learning Made Easy (ELME) is not targeted at any language courses offered at the university, the topics are practical for all level of students.

Topics are arranged based on English skills and sub skills that could assist students in academic communication and future correspondences.

The National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM) is the youngest public institute of higher learning in Malaysia. It runs academic and military training programmes concurrently. The university is supported by two different ministries, namely the MOHE and the Ministry Of Defence Malaysia (MOD). Due to this special linkage, the NDUM is considered a unique and boutique university. It is unique because it awards academic undergraduate degrees together with military ranks of Captain or equivalent to students. It is a boutique university because the future graduates are tailored made to suit the requirements of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF). At the same time, what makes the NDUM a boutique institution is the fact that the number of students per academic seating is capped at only 5,000 students.

The purpose of this study is to investigate what is the best possible approach in utilising MyLinE at the NDUM. This study will focus mainly on the use of student forums in MyLinE. The question addressed in this study then is how the students in a military learning environment utilises student forums at the NDUM.

The significance of the study: It is argued that CMC can be used to deliver various types of courses. Crucially important for this study is the ability of MyLinE to assist students to polish English language. MyLinE is a new support programme launched in 2008. Therefore, researches on MyLinE as an online teaching and learning

tool may be non existence. It is reasonable to assume that this study could be the first attempt to examine how students at a military learning environment use this online programme and what are the challenges faced by them.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data were collected between July and November 2009. This study uses data from a survey distributed to 29 students. Since MyLinE is a new online language programme for the students, the researcher uses a small number of respondents for this preliminary research. This adopted survey, originally developed by MyLinE Task Force Team at UTM, tries to answer two research questions, namely; How do students view the use of MyLinE forum as an online language programme and When where and how do they access MyLinE?

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL): It is critical to define one key concept used in this study. This research adopts CALL as one component of CMC. This is because many scholarly works of CMC discuss how messages are being transmitted using networked communication systems (or non networked systems). For this study, the messages concerned are how language skills and knowledge are transmitted to students.

The history of computing and language learning dates back to the 1970s. Not only limited to any one specific language, language learning through the use of technology allows students the advantage of independent, collaborative, anytime and anywhere learning (Kung, 2002). During its infancy stage, CALL

includes only the use of emails and webs for language learning (Delcloque, 2000). The advancement of Information Communication Technology (ICT) today has contributed to a more advanced utilisation of Web 2.0. In Malaysia, many educational institutions have embarked on their own language programmes that exploit computing and internet facilities.

As this study will demonstrate, MyLinE is amongst a concerted effort by the Malaysian government to support tertiary education students to polish their English language. Initiated by UTM, each public university in Malaysia is given a page to create its own online language support programme, as shown Fig. 1. The NDUM names its MyLinE page as ELME (Fig. 2). As explained earlier, it does not cater to any language courses offered at the university; rather it is arranged based on the language skills and relevant topics that will be covered across all compulsory language courses at the NDUM. Currently, there are eight topics including introduction to grammar; introduction to vocabulary; paragraph, essay and academic writing; speaking and listening; pronunciation; military briefing, presentation and communication skills and reading skills. Under each topic, various types of materials, exercises and notes are provided for students to download or participate online (Fig. 3).

There are obviously significant values and critics of CALL in classrooms practices. One of those critics are described by researches conducted by Segalowitz and Gatbonton (1995) and Calvo (1997) who claim that there is nothing automatic about CALL and thus it is practical to exercise cautions when adapting computers for language learning. Other researchers concentrate on the financial

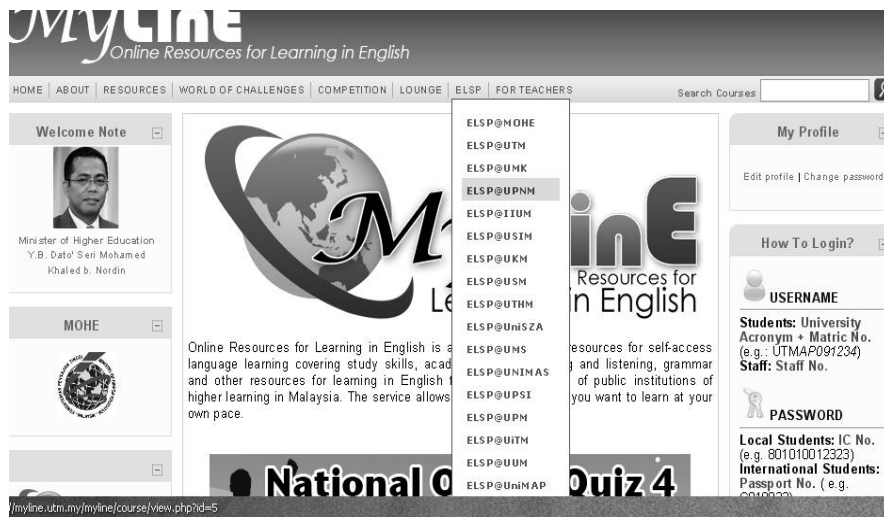


Fig. 1: The main page of MyLinE

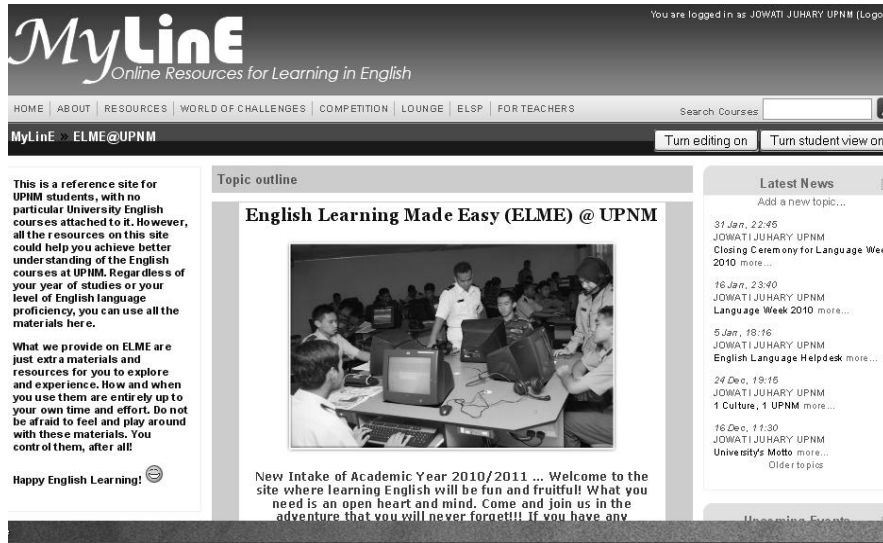


Fig. 2: English Learning Made Easy (ELME) of the NDUM

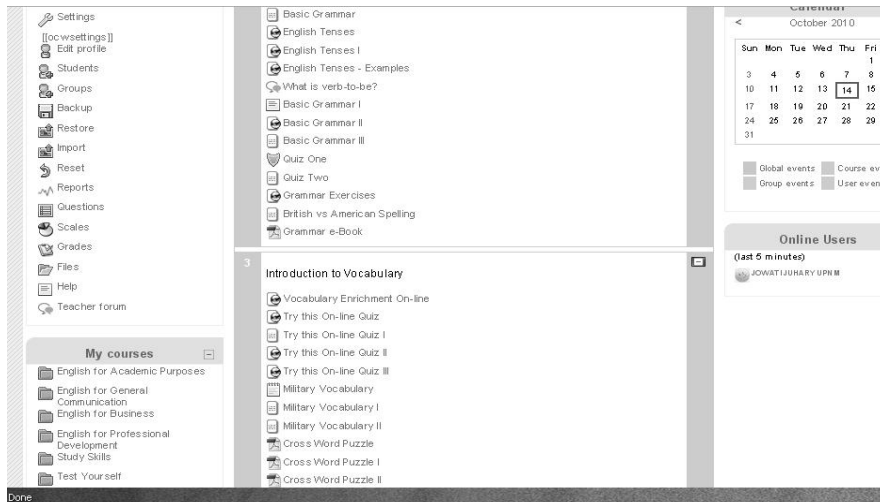


Fig. 3: The topics covered

burden of employing computers for language learning (Gips *et al.*, 2004), as well as the lack of computing knowledge by the educators to fully maximise the technology (Roblyer, 2003). In short, CALL has many limitations despite the pervasive use of it in many classrooms today.

Notwithstanding these critics, there are also some significant values of CALL. For example, Lee (2000) states that CALL is able to:

- Provide practices for students (experiential learning)
- Enhance student achievement
- Increase authentic materials for study
- Encourage greater interaction between teachers and Students and students and peers

- Provide independence from a single source of Information
- Broaden global understanding

Further, Ravichandran (2000) outlines four other advantages. Firstly, he talks about students' interest and motivation. As practise makes perfect, it is essential to provide repeated practise to meet important objectives. Because this process can be dull and frustrating, many students lose interest and motivation to learn a foreign language.

CALL programmes give students a different approach to learn the language. Secondly, Ravichandran stresses on individualisation into which many students need

additional time and individualised practise to meet learning objectives. The computer offers the opportunity for students to self-direct their learning at a speed and level dictated by their own needs. Besides, additional programmes can be made available for students who master learning objectives quickly.

Thirdly, he also stresses the importance of a compatible learning style that could have been catered to by CALL. The students differ in their styles of learning. Many students appear to learn much more effectively when they are able to use a suitable learning style than when they are forced to use an incompatible one. The last advantage suggested by Ravichandran is in terms of immediate feedback that could be offered through CALL. He claims that students receive maximum benefit from feedback only when it is supplied immediately. Their interest and receptivity decreases when the information on their performance is not prompt.

What the above literature captures is that there are always two sides of a coin. It depends on how and why educators would want to use CALL in their classrooms. At best, language learning should be a blended one where the use of technology and face to face interactions are given equal emphasis.

Military institutions and call: Between the years 1990 to present, most organisations including military institutions have come to a realisation that ICT can play a huge role in many facets of today's life. For example, the MAF and the U.S. military have grabbed the opportunities by actively engaging in ICT development, especially for language learning.

In August 2002, the MAF started its online learning programme with the first virtual university in Malaysia, University Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR). This programme caters to in service personnel who are either sent by the MAF or who themselves applied for the programme. Upon completion of their studies, they will be awarded undergraduate degrees by UNITAR. It is critical to mention that the practice of online learning at UNITAR for part time personnel is a blended one; they still have to attend face to face sessions at least for a few hours per semester depending on the faculties' requirement. By embarking on this programme the MAF has acknowledged that CMC can help its personnel to advance their career by improving their academic qualifications. Additionally, in terms of educating military trainees and officers, the MAF has benefited from various programmes such as online language learning courses which are monitored by the Defence International Training Centre and the Australian Defence Organisation.

These initial online language support programmes, called Virtual Online Language Learning Site (VOLS), aim to improve and enhance the English language skills of the Malaysian participants. The programme can be accessed through the MOD library website at library.mod.gov.my.

For the U.S. military, the motivation for new technologies is different. In the early 1990s, the U.S. military began to transform its educational programmes at all levels through the application of ICT. In fact, it is argued that the U.S. military started CALL programmes due to the pressures for quick and efficient language learning (Delcloque, 2000). Before this transformation of learning strategies, the traditional method of face to face teaching was used. It was the face to face teaching approach that saw the rise of the U.S military power after WWII. Nonetheless, the capacity of online programmes to prepare reservists in a timely manner was a primary motive behind the changes that stressed the need for training to be feasible at any time and anywhere (TRADOC, 2001). In fact, the U.S. military has always been a global trendsetter with most learning initiatives, including e-learning (Rosenberg, 2001) and CALL (Delcloque, 2000). This is hardly a surprising characteristic given the nature of the military-industrial complex that has increasingly defined the U.S. economy in the post-WWII era (Johnson, 2004). Rigorous training had been the hallmark of the U.S. military and it has historically always depended on highly trained personnel.

It is pertinent to understand the background of MyLinE. This online programme started in 2005 to attend to the needs of UTM students only. Realising the importance of MyLinE, the task force approached the MOHE on the possibility of extending the programme to all public institutes of higher learning in Malaysia. The ministry took up the offer and injected about RM2 million for this project to be implemented nationwide. The researcher is the representative of the NDUM in MyLinE National Level Committee. Representing the youngest public university in the system, the researcher believes that much can be learnt from other more established universities on the issues of CALL. This is especially true when training on using and updating content of MyLinE is provided to English instructors from all 20 public universities twice annually.

All in all, the use of technology for language learning is not new in civilian higher learning institutions. The same goes to the military institutions which grab the opportunities to use online language support programmes to equip their military personnel. In order to understand what happens at the training institution of the future military officers for the MAF, the next section examines the responses of 29 students of the NDUM.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey questions were adopted from a detailed questionnaire by MyLinE task force team. For the purpose of this small scale research, only 15 items were used from the original set of questionnaires, including questions on the use of student forums as well as the accessibility of MyLinE for the NDUM students. The data were analysed manually since this study is only concerned with the frequency and percentages of data obtained.

All 29 respondents are 2nd year students majoring in Computer Science (Computer system security and Intelligent System). They are registered users of MyLinE and are fully aware that they could access MyLinE. At present, the NDUM has about 80% military cadets and 20% civilian students. The respondents consist of about 70% military students. In terms of gender, only 8 students are female. They were informed that during the whole semester, they would be observed in terms of using MyLinE and at the end of the semester that they would be participating in a survey. Students were informed that they would be virtually observed; virtual observation suggests that the researcher is able to track students' activities in MyLinE. This information must be given to students in order to ensure that they will take the opportunities to utilise MyLinE to the fullest. Generally, Table 1 shows some of the key issues in accessibility of MyLinE to the respondents. The table

Table 1: Accessibility of MyLinE

Items/Answers	Frequency	Percentage
I have used MyLinE		
Once	4	14
>5 times	17	58
>10 times	6	21
>5 times	2	7
Total	29	100
I use		
My own desktop to access MyLinE	1	4
My own laptop to access MyLinE	28	96
The university computing facilities to access MyLinE	0	0
My friends' computing facilities to access MyLinE	0	0
Total	29	100
I use MyLinE		
Voluntarily	21	73
As a course requirement	6	20
Out of curiosity	2	7
Total	29	100
I usually access MyLinE using		
University internet connection-wireless	15	52
University internet cable (LAN)	7	24
Own internet connection-wireless	7	24
Own internet connection-cable (LAN)	0	0
Total	29	100
The hours that I access MyLinE		
Early morning-5.00-8.00 am	0	0
Morning-8.01-11.59 am	1	4
Afternoon-12.00- 6.30 pm	0	0
Late afternoon-6.31-7.59 pm	11	37
Evening- 8.00-11.59 pm	15	52
Midnight-12.00-4.59 am	2	7
Total	29	100

suggests that the majority of respondents have accessed MyLinE about 5 times in the duration of 14 weeks. At the same time, the table also postulates that the majority of respondents use MyLinE voluntarily. It appears that the respondents log into MyLinE after the official academic hours which is between 6.30-11.59 pm and they mainly use the university wireless internet connection for accessing MyLinE.

It is understood that being a Computer Science major, all respondents have their own computing facilities with 96% of respondents possess laptops and one respondent or 4% owns a desktop. The student forums in MyLinE aim at allowing students freedom of expression. Further, the forum acts as a venue to exchange opinions. The most important aspect of this forum is that respondents get to meet and interact with students from other public universities in Malaysia. Therefore, the researcher feels that there is a huge potential for the forum to improve students' language proficiency and thus it could also broaden students'

Table 2: Issues on Using Forums

Items/Answers	Frequency	Percentage
I have used the student forum in MyLinE		
Once	1	4
Between 2-5 times	14	48
Between 6-10 times	9	31
>10 times	5	17
Total	29	100
I use		
English language only in the forums	14	48
Bahasa Malaysia only in the forums	3	10
A mixture of English and Bahasa Malaysia	12	42
Total	29	100
I use		
Short forms/phrases of my chosen language in the forums	14	48
Full sentences of my chosen language in the forums	15	52
Total	29	100
I interact with students from		
My university only	4	14
Other universities only	3	10
Both my university and other universities	22	76
Total	29	100
*I will		
Initiate a new topic	15	52
Participate in topics about academic	24	83
Participate in topics about military	21	72
Participate in topics about current issues	19	66
Participate in no specific topics/free discussion	11	37
I am normally		
An active contributor/participant in the forums	15	52
A passive participant-just read the threads	14	48
Total	29	100
If I do not agree with some statements made by others in the forums, I will		
Just ignore and leave the discussion	6	21
Reply with my arguments	9	31
Continue to participate without giving any comments that could ignite anger/fight	14	48
Total	29	100
I believe that the forums in MyLinE		
Have helped improve my English language proficiency	6	21
Have helped increase my confidence in using English	5	17
Have not helped me to improve my English	18	62
Total	29	100

perspectives. Table 2 shows the responses of the respondents on issues of using forums in MyLinE. From the Table 2, it can be argued that the respondents are sceptical about using forums to improve their English language proficiency. Although, it appears from the table that the respondents are keen of using the student forums, they may not have benefitted as much because the frequency of using the forums is quite low which is on average between 2-10 times for the duration of 14 weeks. The researcher cross checks the number of times each respondent participated in the student forums; the frequency appears to be consistent with the responses of the students. In actual fact for some of the data, the researcher is able to double check with the tracking system in MyLinE. In so doing, the researcher is able to verify the data collected from the respondents.

Given that the preferred use of languages in the forums are more towards a mixture of Bahasa Malaysia and English, this could be one of the main factors that lead to the respondents' scepticisms. Because this study argues for the ability of the student forums to improve students' language proficiency, it is a surprise to see that some respondents are using Bahasa Malaysia alone during the forums (10%) and another 42% of respondents use a mixture of Bahasa Malaysia and English language. It is a reasonable assumption that due to this, the students are not able to appreciate the use of forums as a means to improve their language proficiency and competency. Later, this researcher will come back to this point about students' doubt on MyLinE forums.

In addition, at the end of the survey students were asked to provide comments on whether the student forums in MyLinE could be a good setting to improve their English proficiency. Out of 29 respondents, 26 provided their comments and these are discussed based on the categories outlined by the researcher, including limited time to use the forums, topics of discussion in the forums and monitoring of the forums.

About 24 respondents claimed that they do not have time to participate in the student forums. Having taught at the NDUM for >7 years, the researcher believes that the daily timetable which is very rigid has hindered the students from having some free time for themselves. Although, evening hours are blocked from any activities, students will be expected to do their revisions in the designated classrooms (preparatory hours). It is reasonable if the students refuse to use MyLinE after the preparatory hours because they have to attend to other military administration. Moreover, at 11.59 pm, all military cadets on campus are expected to go to bed and get the rest that they badly need.

As to the civilian students, the researcher is able to sum that they too have an issue with the lack of time to use MyLinE. Although, they are not constrained by the tight schedule as their military counterparts, they reason

that other revision works and commitments have limited their capacity to utilise the student forums. This is an interesting point to pursue; nonetheless due to limited resources on the part of the researcher, an investigation into this will have to be performed in a later study.

The topics discussed in the student forums are also one of the factors for students' uncertainty. About 14 respondents commented that they sometimes have problems understanding the topics discussed because they do not experience the problems/issues. The NDUM is a closed learning environment because military students live on campus. This suggests that military students are not free to request for outing. On one hand, this routine may have handicapped the NDUM students in terms of socialising outside of campus. On the other hand, this rule is critical for student holistic development, as per required by the MAF.

For the civilian students who have accommodations outside the NDUM, they too appear to be restricted in terms of coping with the topics discussed in the forum. This could be either due to their own inability to articulate their thoughts or their own pessimistic attitudes. It needs to be emphasised that these reasons could also be true to the military cadets who reside on campus.

On the issue of topics covered, the researcher reflects on the respondents' use of language in the student forums and realises a key problem. Since only 48% of respondents employ full English in the forums, this has raised a question on why students fail to use the target language in the student forums. In addition from Table 2 about half of the respondents use full sentences to express their opinions and the rest only use phrases or short forms. This suggests that perhaps the complexity of the topics has stopped the students from contributing further. Whatever the reason is a further study and analysis is needed to capture the overall scenario.

Coming back to the comments made by the respondents, the third one highlights the lack of monitoring in the forums. About 19 respondents felt that the lack of monitoring from the instructors on the running of the forums has dampened their efforts to use the online discussion facilities. The respondents believed that in order for their language to be improved, monitoring is crucial because they could get feedback on their language skills. The author concurs with the respondents' arguments because feedback is very significant in language learning. Nonetheless, intervention in terms of feedback may defeat the purpose of independent and collaborative learning in the student forums.

The researcher who was also teaching the respondents for one English course called English for oral communication used MyLinE only as a supporting teaching and learning tool. In fact the researcher did not use MyLinE during face to face sessions with the 29 respondents; the students were required to venture

MyLinE on their own. The philosophy behind this strategy is that the students must be able to manage their time and filter what information that should be prioritised. The researcher did not participate actively in the discussions; she just silently monitored what was happening in the forums about 1 h day⁻¹.

From the discussion and analysis, it can be summarised that the respondents of the survey are not ready to use the student forums in MyLinE because of three key factors. Notwithstanding the positive acceptance of respondents towards MyLinE in general, they are quite reluctant to use the student forums effectively to polish their English language ability. These challenges will be appropriately addressed next.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, as an online support programme MyLinE is considered a success because it has received positive responses from students of higher learning institutions in Malaysia. As a learning tool at the NDUM, the students have some resistances towards using MyLinE mainly due to administrative challenges. The NDUM has a huge task to equip future military officers with English language proficiency. After all these graduates will participate in future operations overseas and the importance of communication is of the utmost importance. It is a reasonable assumption that the NDUM will have a daunting task to convince the students to use all tools in MyLinE and not only the forums for the progress of their English language skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As new technologies and programmes keep intruding the classrooms, it is expected that academics must always be prepared to welcome the changes. MyLinE will be no different. Since it is a support programme that is utilised by all public universities in Malaysia and it is free, the NDUM should take the advantages offered by this support programme. In order to ensure a successful utilisation of MyLinE at the NDUM, the students' concerns must be taken into considerations.

This study argues that the timetable of students at the NDUM must undergo some slight changes in order to cater to the needs for reflective and independent learning. At present, due to the nature of the military learning environment, every activity is arranged for the students. Allowing 2 or 3 h for leisure activities may push the students to optimise MyLinE or other independent revisions. Moreover, the respondents were not comfortable with the topics in the forums. That is why the respondents were not active during the online discussions or they simply refuse to log in. To address this, the instructors at the NDUM need to improve the

quality of content in MyLinE. In so doing, the students will have more input to be shared in the student forums. Another alternative is for the instructors to provide quality face to face discussions and input during the normal teaching and learning hours. This may ensure that students are prepared to participate in the student forums.

The researcher argues that monitoring of students' discussions on student forums may not benefit the students. However, the discussions could be captured asynchronously in order to give feedback to participants in terms of how students frame their arguments and how they structure their language. Given that the aim of MyLinE amongst others is to improve students' language proficiency, the instructors at the NDUM must guarantee that students get the feedback that they highly seek. At the same time, a more structured way of using the forums must be prepared by the Department of Languages and Cultures of the NDUM. A clear policy and procedure will help to develop the effectiveness of MyLinE.

It is critical that further studies on this matter is undertaken using a bigger sample of respondents. The focus then could be on the potential of MyLinE as a whole to improve students' English language proficiency. The instructors who teach English language must also be consulted in terms of their perceptions of MyLinE. After all, these are the manpower who prepares the content for ELME, the NDUM MyLinE page.

In answering the question on what is the best possible approach to maximise the potential of MyLinE, the researcher believes that two things must be considered. First, the language courses offered at the NDUM must include MyLinE as part of the assessment. This suggests that students will have to log in and will have to actively participate in order to be awarded the points. If this happens, this also means that ELME must have a special section to address each language course appropriately. Second, the instructors at the NDUM must adapt MyLinE as a supplementary tool. MyLinE will not replace the face-to-face sessions. Let MyLinE be used independently by the students in order to build their discipline and characters. However, the instructors must allocate time to monitor students' activities.

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