Available online at http://ijleal.ump.edu.my/
International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics (IJLEAL)

ISSN: 2289-7208 print; 2289-9294 online
08 (2) 83-91

# Student Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Using Tell Me More for Pronunciation Learning

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**Abstract**

This paper reports students' perceptions of the effectiveness of using Tell Me More (TMM) as a pronunciation learning software. A mixed method design was employed to find out how the students perceived TMM, a language learning software that was developed to enhance language skills that are needed to communicate. In this study, the emphasis is given on the oral exercises in TMM specifically word, sentence, and phonetics pronunciations. The participants were 28 students of a technical university in Malaysia, and the study was conducted to explore the pronunciation issues surrounding the utilization of TMM. The data from TMM was collected using stimulated recall, and all 28 students were interviewed, to pursue in-depth information on student perceptions. The findings indicated that most of the students had mixed perceptions of the effectiveness of using TMM as a pronunciation learning software.



*Keywords:* Learning software; Perception; Pronunciation learning; Stimulated recall; TeLL Me More

## INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is an element of language learning component that is a part of speaking skills, and it is deemed to be one of the least researched areas in language learning especially for the Non-Native Speakers (NNS) of a language. In a country like Malaysia, English pronunciation learning conditions have its challenges, and one of the many difficulties would be the inherent cultural identities that view the English language as linguistic imperialism brought over by the English (Pillai & Jayapalan, 2010). However, in the early 18th century, the British-ruled Malaya (then) resulted in many colonial blends of spoken languages. After the country's independence, the English language continued to become an essential part of conversations among the people (Crystal, 2006).

The different races in Malaysia have revolutionized the English pronunciation per their preferences. The use of -lah, -mah, -leh, -ah, -kan at the end of every spoken sentence in English, has become fossilized among the Malaysian communities and it slowly became Manglish. Manglish is an English-based creole spoken in Malaysia with words originating from the Malay, Cantonese, and Tamil language (Lee, 2015). In most cases, the use of Manglish in daily conversations among students have led them to believe that a proper English language is being spoken with correct pronunciation skills. Though, the majority of Malaysians still prefer speaking in their mother tongue such as Malay, Cantonese, Tamil, Iban, Kayan; the English language is widely understood and used around the country. It is because the English language in classrooms and higher learning institutions in Malaysia are taught following the Standard British English as a pedagogic model to expose students to native-like pronunciation (Pillai & Jayapalan, 2010). Even though the students are exposed to the Standard British English in classrooms, most of the students are believed to tend to use colloquial English pronunciations, resorting to Manglish.

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Teachers who are responsible for teaching pronunciation are often scrambled with other teaching responsibilities, resulting in a limited focus on pronunciation teachings from the teacher's part. Consequently, most students in Malaysia have poor pronunciation skills which are extended to tertiary education. For example, in learning the English language pronunciation, most language teachers who are NNS of the language have the tendency to overlook small pronunciation errors, like, /ʒuː/ (jus) instead of /dʒʌst/ (just), /viːʒən/ (vesen) instead of /vɪʒən/ (vision) or /θɪəri/(-/ teari) instead of /tiːɒri/ (theory). Teachers would normally correct pronunciation errors only when the students use unintelligible sentences in conversations (Sakiyama, 2000). Therefore, to contain the poor pronunciation skills among undergraduates at the university, many tentative measures were taken to help students learn pronunciation correctly.

One of the provisional steps adopted by a university is by introducing a language learning software that integrates pronunciation learning. Such software is Tell Me More (TMM). Tell Me More is a language education software that is designed to help learners to give feedback on pronunciation, based on speech recognition. The introduction of TMM in a language classroom has been proven to help many language learners in institutions such as the California State University, Florida State University, and Michigan State University (Auralog TeLL Me More Language Software, 2008). However, its effectiveness is yet to be proven in a non-native speaking country like Malaysia.

TMM is integrated by language teachers in one of the technical universities in Malaysia to allow students to utilize the pronunciation learning modules in TMM independently. The pronunciation learning modules in TMM does not follow the Standard British English. Therefore, this mixed method study is conducted at a technical university among its' engineering undergraduates to find out students' perceptions on the effectiveness of using the word, sentences and phonetics modules in TMM as a pronunciation learning software. The findings of this study will aid in determining if the language learning software is compatible with the pronunciation needs of the engineering undergraduates in the technical university. Therefore, this paper reports the effectiveness of pronunciation modules in TMM in language learning classrooms in a non-English speaking country and answers the following research question: What are students' perceptions on the effectiveness of TMM as a pronunciation learning software? The findings of this study are limited to one language learning software, and thus, cannot be generalized to other commercially available software.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Pronunciation is a pivotal element in the learning of oral skills in a second language. The mastery of pronunciation in the second language, however, takes time depending on the students and the teachers (Varasarin, 2007). Majority of English language learners assumes that speaking the language with correct pronunciation can be modified after their first languages (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2008). Hence, when English learners face difficulties while studying English pronunciation, they became demotivated and are found to experience difficulties to learn pronunciation.

Malaysian students noticeably have problems with pronunciation, of which, to an extent, weakens the learners confidence in speaking and listening. Students who are pursuing their studies at the higher level are expected to meet a certain accuracy in pronunciation. However, many undergraduates still failed to provide intelligible pronunciation. Xu (1991) pointed out that undergraduate students are shy and afraid to ask for assistances in learning the pronunciation of the language. They are constantly subjected to ridicule when mistakes are made in pronunciation. According to Morley, (1998) limited pronunciation skills can undermine learner's self-assurance, self-confidence, and restrict social interactions. Hence, the emergence of language learning software, like TMM, has created an innovative approach in the field of pronunciation learning and continues to challenge new findings on methods to learn pronunciation.

Meanwhile, the limited studies on students' perception of pronunciation learning have led to significant studies like Derwing and Rossiter (2002), Tergujeff (2013) and Kang (2015). These studies have substantiated that non-native English speakers found the pronunciation activities in classrooms to be insufficient and inefficient in pronunciation teaching methods while challenging pronunciation learning curriculum often lead students to confusion. In Derwing and Rossiter (2002) study, the adult EFL students

are reported to have not benefitted from pronunciation instruction in the classroom, citing a mismatch between learners' attitude in learning pronunciation and the current pronunciation teaching practices in classrooms.

Tergujeff (2013) found that from ten EFL learners from a public education system in Finland, only two learners expressed satisfaction on pronunciation teaching methods while the rest claimed that the pronunciation teaching methods in classrooms are inefficient. In addition to that, Kang (2015) found that students largely from South Korea and Japan are dissatisfied with pronunciation learning curriculum compared to students from Pakistan and South Africa. The study concluded that dissatisfaction to the pronunciation learning curriculum is due to confusion of various pronunciation models and teachers' mono model treatment of accent variation. The findings of these studies asserted that pronunciation learning materials and techniques must be central to student's pronunciation needs.

The findings from Derwing and Rossiter (2002), Tergujeff (2013) and Kang (2015) complements a study conducted by Scrivener (2005) who stated that in order to achieve success in pronunciation learning, instructors should teach based on student's needs. Jenkins (2000) and Walker (2010) agreed that students' needs are central to pronunciation learning. Jenkins (2000) opined that if the students necessitate English for international communication, then teachers must focus on students a local variety of English rather than a native speaker model to ensure the student's intelligibility in pronunciation learning. Similarly, in English classroom teachers need to determine students' perspective and pronunciation learning objective before designing the curriculum for non-native speakers of the language. The statement is further supported by Harmer (2007) by stating that learners have specified needs, based on their expectations from previously taught pronunciation lessons. Subsequently, understanding and identifying students' perspective in pronunciation learning will prove to be beneficial.

Consequently, the research into students' perception on pronunciation lessons for non-native speakers is rather limited, to begin with (Muller, 2011; Simon & Taverniers, 2011). Nevertheless, in the last decade, attempts were made to address the gap in the literature. In this light, Cenoz and Lecumberri (1999) researched to understand students' perceptions on pronunciation learning and found that while students perceive pronunciation lesson to be difficult, most of the students felt the lesson to be necessary to be understood. In addition to that, Derwing & Munro (2005) concluded that 55% of ESL learners in Canada, opined that pronunciation is challenging and 90% would take on pronunciation programme to help them learn. As of now, the student's perceptions of the effectiveness of using TMM as pronunciation in a technical university in Malaysia had not been established. Therefore, to find out the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of TMM, a qualitative study using stimulated recall was carried out.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed method research design that attempts to gather information regarding students' perception of the effectiveness of a pronunciation learning software. Creswell, Shope, Plano Clark and Green (2006) opine that by employing mixed method study, the diversity of ideas gathered during data collection will provide a platform to explore the research problem. The simulated recall gathered the student's pronunciation scores whereas the interview recorded students' perception of the effectiveness of using TMM as a pronunciation learning software.

### 3.1 Participants

The participants were 28 first and second-year engineering students, who have used TMM before the administration of the current study. Additionally, all participants in this study are students of a technical university, who have been exposed to the Standard British English pronunciation sounds while at school.

## 3.2 Research Materials and Instruments

### *3.2.1 Tell Me More*

The research material used in this study is a language software called Tell Me More (TMM). TMM is produced by Rosetta Stone Inc. which develops language learning solutions for languages like French, Spanish, Italian, German, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Dutch, and English. Rosetta Stone is a software company that focuses on education technology and literacy courses that are used globally. By using the pronunciation lessons, every student can access TMM and respond actively to the speech recognition activities. Automated Speech Recognition (ASR) is a technology that allows users to speak to the computers through an interface. The most advanced version of ASR technology is called Natural Language Processing (NLP), where it was deemed to be the closest to allowing real conversation between people and machine intelligence (Yu & Deng, 2016). However, in TMM, ASR is used to provide pronunciation scores and corrective feedback based on the student's pronunciation. The ASR translates the speech signals into a sequence of words and then analysed by comparing the rate of speech and the students closest utterance to the model speaker to obtain a high score (Neri, Cucchiarini & Stirk, 2003). Rosetta Stone believes that languages can be learned at any age and the immersion in the language is possible without having to be present physically in a country that uses it. Therefore, in this study, TMM is used by first and second-year undergraduate engineering students as a pronunciation learning software.

### *3.2.2 Simulated Recall*

The first instrument is the stimulated recall that uses TMM's pronunciation modules to collect data on pronunciation exercises completed in TMM. The simulated recall has been used to investigate cognitive processes by including participants of the study to recall concurrent thinking when prompted with the use of audio or video as demonstrated in Fox-Turnbull (2009). The stimulated recall was implemented to record learner's recognition of feedback in a foreign language classroom. A 50 minutes' lesson was recorded during a class period which was then viewed by three students from the class. The students were asked to write their perceptions on the instructor's feedback to allow the researcher to view the nature of the instruction from the learner's perspectives. The study conducted by Fox-Turnbull (2009) is one of many studies that used simulated recall to understand students' language needs in classrooms.

Similarly, Egi (2008) used a stimulated recall as a visual aid to help recall the memory. The stimulation included stimulus of reading passages or writing reviews on products. However, in the context of this study, the pronunciation module in TMM is used as a stimulus and the data obtained will be used to explore students' perception of the pronunciation modules. In the same light, in this study, students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the pronunciation modules in TMM was obtained through simulated recall. Firstly, students were asked to access oral workshop in TMM that has specific exercises on words, sentences, and phonetics pronunciation. The scores obtained from the stimulus were used to reflect the student's perceptions of effectiveness on TMM. By employing stimulated recall to obtain the pronunciation scores, the researcher could get access to the students' perception on the pronunciation learning software without the inference of time lapse, memory lapse, and biases.

### *3.2.3 Interview*

The second instrument used in this study is a semi-structured interview was used to identify students' perception on the effectiveness of TMM's pronunciation modules. The main purpose of the interview phase is to explore student's opinions of the pronunciation modules in TMM. The questions centred on students' thoughts and perceived notions on how TMM helped their pronunciation skills in the short course of using it. The responses were gathered using an online platform.

## 3.3 Research Procedures

After the stimulated recall exercise was collected, students were asked to attempt the pronunciation modules in TMM. The researcher limited the students to three attempts for each pronunciation activity. The accuracy of the pronunciation is compared by using ASR scores, where the pronunciations were graded based on the scale of 1, being the lowest and 7, being the highest. After the completion of the pronunciation modules, the pronunciation scores were obtained from Performance Evaluation, an interface in TMM. Subsequently, the interview was conducted to gain insight into students' perception in learning pronunciation using TMM. The interview data were then coded to identify similar themes. By investigating the data obtained from the stimulated recall, with sessions combined with semi-structured interview questions, the researcher can explore students learning pronunciation with the integration of TMM.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## 4.1 Findings of the Stimulated Recall

The data gathered from the stimulus showed that 77% of the student scored between 4 and 6 for word pronunciation. As for sentence pronunciation, 61% of the students scored between 2 and 4. On the contrary, 73% of the students scored between 1 to 3 in phonetics pronunciations. From the pronunciation scores, it was observed that the majority of the student had difficulty in pronouncing phonetics. Conversely, the students fared well in word pronunciation, compared to sentence pronunciation. Table 1 presents the stimulated recall data and is followed by semi-structured interview questions to document students perception on the effectiveness of TMM.

**Table 1.** Pronunciation scores based on words, phonetics and sentences.

| STUDENTS | PRONUNCIATION | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Words | | | Phonetics | | | Sentences | | |
| | I | II | III | I | II | III | I | II | III |
| **1** | 5 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| **2** | 6 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 6 |
| **3** | 4 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 5 |
| **4** | 7 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| **5** | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 6 | 2 | 4 |
| **6** | 6 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 5 |
| **7** | 3 | 4 | 7 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| **8** | 5 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| **9** | 7 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 5 |
| **10** | 6 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 7 | 3 |
| **11** | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| **12** | 5 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| **13** | 6 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| **14** | 7 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| **15** | 4 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| **16** | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| **17** | 4 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| **18** | 2 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 7 |
| **19** | 5 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| **20** | 6 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| **21** | 5 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| **22** | 7 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 2 |
| **23** | 5 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 1 |
| **24** | 6 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| **25** | 5 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 5 |
| **26** | 2 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 7 |
| **27** | 5 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| **28** | 6 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 3 |

The findings from the simulated recall found that most students showed consistent pronunciation scores to which later aid to gain qualitative insight into the students thought process while answering the interview questions. The pronunciation activity conducted in TMM acts as a tool for students to augment the pronunciation learning from TMM. A similar method was used by Slough (2001) to gain insight into participants constructs to obtain a comprehensive data range of data. In addition, researchers like Beers, Boshuizen, Kirschner, Gijselaers and Westendorp (2006), too, have published a study into how the use of technology, and in the case of this study, of how a stimulus such as TMM has helped researchers to understand students cognitive process while using a language learning software. This method is vital in determining how students their interpreted the chain of events and thinking while working on the pronunciation modules, which would have been difficult to gain should use a method like observation and interview alone was used.

## 4.2 Findings of the Interview

Based on the simulated recall method, the interview responses interview was further analysed and coded according to common themes, such as students' motivation and confidence, knowledge and skills, attitude and beliefs and pronunciation learning behaviours. The following table illustrates themes that emerged from the responses.

**Table 2.** Students Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the Pronunciation Module.

| Categories of Perception | Student Feedback |
|---|---|
| Motivation & Confidence | • I liked the pronunciation guide the software provided me. "…….it has variety of pronunciation activities……..."<br>• I slurred through the practice because they spoke a bit too fast, but it is cool software. "…….to improve the ability of a pronunciation speaker……"<br>• The software was efficient, but I am afraid others will not understand my pronunciation.<br>• It was very easy to use, and since the lab provided us with a headphone, I liked it<br>• It was exciting to compete with my friends on the scores.<br>• I am happy to use this software because I think I can mingle around by using correct English to my Indian and Chinese friends.<br>• I liked the software because it allowed me to listen to a native speaker and repeat after him/her |
| Knowledge & Skills | • I like the software and the scores is provided. It helped my self-evaluation.<br>• It was interesting. I did not know my pronunciation was that bad before using the software<br>• I now know my weakness while pronouncing. The sound waves guided me in making sure I pronounced the words correctly |

Most students have low attitudes and beliefs where pronunciation modules in TMM are concerned. Students with positive perceptions and beliefs of learning pronunciation are likened to explore different methods to correct their pronunciations and not limited to classrooms and teachers alone (Borges, 2014). One student has expressed reluctance in repeating words, sentences, and phonetics, "*I am tired of repeating the words*." According to the data obtained from the interview, students decreased attitude and beliefs in pronunciation learning are contributed by students' frustration over the speed at which the model speaker speaks. The students responded "*They talked so quickly, and I could not keep up with the activity*" and "*I*

*am tired of repeating the words. The model speaker was too fast, and I felt irritated*." These frustrations indirectly leads to a low level of confidence and high level of anxiety (Smit, 2002).

Another point to be noted is that the level of confidence while using TMM varies. Some of the students felt pronunciation modules in TMM is exciting because they could compare ASR scores among their friends. Kartushina, Hervais-Adelman, Frauenfelder, and Golestani (2015) used a training method that differs from the one used in this study. The participants in Kartushina et al. (2015) reported having gained from the real-time analysis of the acoustic properties of vowels produced by non-native speakers that provides them with immediate feedback that not only increased participants' motivation but also created excitement amongst the participants to work on the pronunciation modules.

From the category of knowledge and skills, most undergraduate Engineering students have a limited understanding of the knowledge and skills required to pronounce words in English. For example, most of them were not exposed to phonetics before they had used the pronunciation modules TMM. Though they are not used to pronouncing the words following the phonetic guides, students still showed great enthusiasm to pronounce the words to get a high ASR score. Alternatively, some of the students scored poorly in the pronunciation modules. It could be because the undergraduate engineering students in the technical university found the pronunciation knowledge to have limited uses for other engineering courses.

The change of behaviours in learning pronunciation showed that students want to work on their pronunciation every day with TMM. The positive change in perceptions is significantly crucial because it indicates that students are not confined to a particular method of pronunciation learning. The positive change of perception is further supported by Furtak and Kuter (2012) that suggests that students who oversee their learning are found to have higher motivation and learning achievement. The students readily welcome pronunciation learning software and not entirely dependent on the teacher to work on pronunciation skills. Similarly, Kember (2000) opines that students who have learning independence adapt and learn to appreciate self-controlled learning experiences over a period. The learning independence in using the pronunciation modules shows that students can identify weakness and work on their needs.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results obtained from this study shows that students at the technical university in Malaysia are found to have mixed perceptions of the effectiveness of TMM as a pronunciation learning software. The mixed perception of using TMM as a pronunciation learning software is consistent with the findings of Harmer (2007) confirming that students have specified needs in pronunciation learning. On the other hand, Lee (2008) suggested that students who benefitted from specific pronunciation correction feedback enjoyed the repetitive functions in the pronunciation activities. The findings from Lee (2008), however, contradicts to the perception of some students in this study who expressed reluctance in the repetitive functions in TMM despite its' automated corrective feedback.

However, most students found TMM to be an effective pronunciation learning software despite having model speakers who enunciate using the American pronunciation instead of the Standard British English. Consequently, this study will contribute to understanding students' needs on pronunciation learning and will prove as a guideline for higher academic institutions to choose TMM as pronunciation learning software for the learners from the student's perspectives. Not only that, by placing a high regard on students' feedback in pronunciation learning, it enables teachers to recognise students' preference in classrooms. Teachers, too, can integrate pronunciation learning software like TMM into the everyday classroom if the need to teach pronunciation arises, provided the teachers' guide students whenever they experience difficulties. Considering this, if the policymakers of the mentioned higher institution take this study seriously, they might find TMM to be a pioneer in preparatory courses that involves pronunciation teaching skills.

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