

Impact of Technology on Teaching and Learning in an Online Programme – Vacation English Enrichment Programme (VEEP)

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ABSTRACT

As online learning is on the rise, able to learn from a physical location is just as important as from a digital environment. There is a need to study the changing situations in order to maintain the quality of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning do not exist in the void; they are dynamic human endeavours that react and inter-react with the ‘givens’ and ‘constraints’ of the immediate environment. Effects of such interaction could be seen in teacher and students’ decision-making processes as well as behavior, and in harnessing the available electronic learning management system for learning purposes. This paper explores the meaning of teaching and learning on an online English programme called VEEP (Vacation English Enrichment Programme), trying to tap into the zeitgeist of the cyber or mobile age. Two aspects of VEEP that could be of particular interest in this paper are the context and the content as they help unfold the symbiosis that existed between internal factors (e.g. teaching and learning input) and external factors (e.g. the learning environment and curriculum) in designing and operating an online programme, shedding some insight into how technology has impacted teaching and learning.

Keywords: online program design and implementation, evaluation of online program, outside class English learning and formal curriculum

1. Introduction

Attending a university with English as the medium of instruction could present a huge challenge to students whose first language is not English, and whose everyday life seldom presents opportunities to use English. These students would need some language support to increase their proficiency and confidence in the use of the language. Although there is much debate over summer homework or summer schooling among educators, parents and students, there has been a growing number of studies (Cooper, et al 2000, 1996; Matthews & Mellom 2012; Liu, et al 2017) which show the benefits of having school work or joining enrichment/remediation programmes in the long summer vacation as well as the detrimental effects of a long summer break on student learning and on students’ achievement test scores. Extending schooling or tutoring time into summer can be an effective way to support student learning in order to prevent academic regression and even to improve achievements among some students. The Vacation English Enrichment Programme (VEEP) is one such support.

VEEP is offered to all first-year students at a university in China. It helps students to improve their English proficiency, build upon the language skills they have acquired and develop their independent learning skills through a series of vacation activities. VEEP, however, is not merely about learning English or learning in English; it is also about enjoying learning English and enjoying learning in English, helping students to seek interest in broader life experiences on an online platform so as to achieve self-initiated or self-sustaining learning.

As a language programme, VEEP concentrates on four skill areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening. The overall aims are:

- To keep students engaged in learning English in an informal setting
- To enhance students’ understanding of their subject discipline by reading ‘non-curricular’ but discipline-related materials in English
- To enlarge students’ English vocabulary, especially those words that are related to their subject

disciplines

- To enhance students' general reading, writing, listening and speaking skills
- To develop students' self-learning habits in English using a variety of resources

This paper will include description and discussion of the following:

- Efforts are made in the design and preparation of VEEP materials
- Implementation of the VEEP
- Issues at different stages of implementation, and the dynamics between technology (e.g. its availability) and pedagogy (its adoption in teaching and learning)
- Students' feedback on the programme
- Implications for future VEEP and insights into eLearning in general

Before detailing efforts to help ensure efficacy of the programme, its effectiveness in delivery and its efficiency in operation, this paper will start with an account of the relevant teaching and learning concepts that underpin the programme structure.

2. Pedagogical and Learning Beliefs

2.1 Constructivism

This programme is informed by the constructivist teaching and learning theory (Atherton, 2013) that learning is an active process and that acquisition of knowledge consists in the construction of subjective representations of reality based on personal experience. The implication is the learner plays a key role in the learning process, bringing experiences and cultural factors to a learning situation – a specific context or environment in which new skills or information is built upon prior skills or information, enhancing one's skills or increasing one's knowledge. In a learning process, challenges and set backs are common.

It is believed learner motivations and attitudes are the essential force that helps sustain commitment. A learner's varying degrees of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) – the belief that s/he has the abilities to achieve a task, can make a difference in the time and effort being dedicated to a task. Learners with stronger self-efficacy tend to be more willing to persist when meeting challenges and more resilient in coping with setbacks, as they believe they will succeed in the end, albeit it will take a longer time.

Time and effort are essential to successful learning, and that time and effort invested in an activity is often the result of the intensity of an experience of interest that arises from engaging in something which is meaningful and relevant to an individual. An individual's goal may be mastery- or performance-oriented, developing or improving his/her skills or focusing on outperforming others on a particular task. The power of interest (both individual and situational interests) plays an important role in engaging students during the learning process and that interest itself, in its own right, should be an outcome and a key success component in learning (Harackiewicz & Hulleman, 2010).

Providing information, practice and resources can help engage learners, but to engage in learning is the learner's own responsibility, his or her own special way of taking control of their own learning which is known as self-regulated learning.

2.2 Key notions underpinning the programme

Four prominent notions permeate in VEEP's design and implementation.

2.2.1 *User-oriented online learning environment*

This refers to the entire online context of learning which includes learning input, learning support, attainment and programme evaluation, as well as the administrative arrangements, facilities and resources provided. The environment is focused on helping students to develop their skills in independent learning, stressing the importance of managing one's learning properly (e.g. following instructions, keeping deadlines, reaching out for assistance when faced with problems).

2.2.2 Growth mindset behind activities alignment

This concerns the suitability of objectives or aims of a learning episode, the accompanied activities and performance evaluation. It helps reflect not just students' abilities in the language but also their capabilities to function as an effective learner. Activities in each learning episode will allow for individual language development, helping students to open up new possibilities or explore new interests in everyday life. Assessment for some activities is designed to highlight students' ability to reflect, self-improve and make choices and decisions. For example, students working on the language skill 'speaking' were given a chance to select and showcase their best performance for assessment. (Please refer to Appendix I.)

2.2.3 Integration of practice in everyday life

While acknowledging the fact that students bring along with them a unique set of attitudes and preferences to their own learning, it is believed the way practice being carried out in a learning process can help form new learning habits or modify existing practices to make learning more effective. VEEP stresses multimedia learning, using visual and auditory information in the instructional content – content that students can easily relate to, and that enriches students' experience in the learning process. The way to learn on the programme reflects how and what we learn on a daily basis, be it from print (such as newspapers) or video materials (such as radio or TV broadcasts), making learning on the programme more readily beneficial to students' everyday lives, blurring the divide between practice and authentic experiences.

2.2.4 Learner-oriented online instructional concept

All VEEP materials are geared towards engaging students and actively involving them in activities that can lead to learning. Apart from engaging students with what they are to learn, the materials also help students to focus on certain dimensions of language skills so as to help them master the use of the language more easily. Some learning instructions involve expanding students' experience through various senses, trying to connect or relate to students. It is generally believed that although VEEP is a formal programme and has an intentional outcome as well as a clearly spelled-out learning environment, it nevertheless recognizes the significance of incidental or informal learning that falls outside the stated learning outcomes or objectives but is related to students' personal reason(s) for learning or interest. Motivational factors (such as students' interest, ease of access, variety and diversity of activities, relevance) and appropriate levels of difficulty and thinking are taken into consideration during the process of designing and preparing auditory and visual online learning episodes. The materials are to facilitate student learning, making full use of the vast resources of online data and information. The instructional approach adopted is related to the development of self-directed learning strategies, highlighting students' responsibility for their own learning, which can take place at a time and at a place and pace that is most convenient or suitable for the students.

3. Programme Structure

VEEP is designed as a package of English activities covering four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing, to allow students a chance to continue with their English learning in a three-week period during their summer vacation at the end their Year-One studies. The programme is to account for 10% of the students' English course in the first semester of Year Two, immediately after the summer.

The following shows the objectives, intended learning outcomes, content and assessment of the programme.

3.1 Objectives

The VEEP programme aims to promote Year-One students' interest in learning English independently during the summer vacation, to further improve students' English skills and help students integrate English learning into daily activities. To achieve these objectives, the programme will provide opportunities for students to develop self-directed learning strategies that are fundamental to life-long learning.

3.2 Intended learning outcomes

Upon completion of VEEP, Year One and Year Two students will:

- Improve ability to select and use online English learning materials to meet specific needs
- Enhance self-evaluation and self-reflection of learning to supplement English skills learned in class
- Apply appropriate English language skills in different situations and contexts
- Use English in everyday situations

3.3 Contents of the programme

The programme contains one session for each of the four language skill areas.

Listening – Students listen to dialogues and speeches in authentic situations and recall the main idea and important details.

Aims: to improve listening skills to different messages

Activities: listening to a song, audio recording and a TED Talk

Speaking – Students learn vocal techniques in speech, articulation, pause, and word and syllable emphasis.

Aims : to improve articulation, stress and intonation

Activities: making 3 recordings of reading aloud

Reading – Students read discipline-related passages, which are designed to keep them informed in areas of studies and to improve their comprehension and vocabulary.

Aims: to improve reading discipline-related articles and to improve vocabulary

Activities: reading passages and answering questions; complete vocabulary exercises

Writing – Students apply their critical thinking skills to writing, which consists of a range of writing genres.

Aims: to improve opinion and reflective writing, e.g. expressing opinions, reflecting on experiences; showing creativity

Activities: writing about ones' favorite song/film (200-250 words); reflect on year-one experience (250-300 words)

The following are also recommended to students in order to help them integrate use of English with their daily lives, as well as develop habits and interests in using English.

- English news bulletin on CCTV (A URL and discussion forum are included.)
- English newspaper such as China Daily (A URL and discussion forum are included.)
- A list of suggested readings (including best sellers, popular classic books)

3.4 Assessment methods

To give recognition to students' efforts in keeping up their proficiency in English, performance in the programme activities is given 10% weighting in the continuous assessment in an English course called 'English II' in the first semester of Year Two. The following table shows the assessed activity types in each language skill.

Type of Assessment	Description of Assessment Activities
Listening	Comprehension of listening passages and important details
Speaking	Speech production to meet task requirements that focus on fluency, correct pronunciation and appropriate intonation for specific task situations
Reading	Comprehension questions at the end of discipline-related passages to test students' understanding of content and related vocabulary
Writing	Composing different types of writing to demonstrate language accuracy, appropriate style, and coherence

In order to motivate students and give them a sense of control over performance evaluation, students were asked to choose one completed activity out of three for assessment purposes in Speaking. (Please refer to Appendix I.) It is believed that by adding choices, the programme can help empower students to make decisions about their own learning, making them more aware of the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning too.

4. Material Design and Preparation

To understand how best to start designing materials for online learning, a closer look at the current way of pursuing studies can help identify some prerequisite skills that are basic to online learning. Thus, the first step was a study undertaken with regard to the necessary skills required by students to engage in online learning. The table on the next page shows a comparison in writing on paper and electronically, illustrating similar analysis being employed when material developers prepared themselves for dealing with the other three language skills (speaking, listening and reading).

Comparison between paper writing and online writing

Writing Mechanics	Paper Tasks	Online Tasks
Spelling	Sound-symbol connection	Use of spell check software
	Memory for spelling	Use of spell check software
Vocabulary	Memory for words	E-thesaurus, e-dictionary
Grammar/syntax semantics	Recognition and understanding of grammatical patterns	Use of Grammar Checker
Punctuation/capitalization	Memory for understanding and application of rules	Use of Grammar Checker
Writing Process	Paper Tasks	Online Tasks
Acquire knowledge/information	Library search Reading comprehension Short- and long-term memory	Net search Reading comprehension
Write the text	Understanding of aims of writing Knowledge of writing procedures, text and paragraph structures	Understanding of aims of writing Knowledge of writing procedures, text and paragraph structures Using online writing tools

Learning is a process and instruction is to manipulate the situation to create an environment that will facilitate the process of learning.

Two major ideas playing an important role in shaping efforts at this stage were: learnability and usability. Learnability refers to the environment or content of the materials; usability, the ability of the learning environment or content to facilitate learning. In other words, learnability is about the instructional content; usability is about usability of the online site, the ease with which to learn. Regarding the learning content, decisions were made about:

- the appropriate levels of difficulty
- the appropriate amount of time to engage students
- activities or topics that are meaningful to students

Ease of comprehension, interest and relevance, as well as associative power of the materials were among content selection criteria for the online site. Much thought was then put into rendering the site usable so that the students could work on the site easily and intuitively. At this stage, teachers functioned as task managers, designing activities and tasks, selecting objectives and resources, working at creating a rich non-classroom learning experience. Teachers showed commendable sensitivity in their material selection as they were fully aware of the fact that their decisions could have a bearing on how the programme would be perceived. Teachers arranged learning activities and engineered a learning environment (including communication options, information resources and learning tools) to help students achieve their learning goals.

5. Programme Package – materials and services

All VEEP materials are on the university's iSpace platform (an online learning management system) and they are prepared and designed by ELC teachers. Since VEEP is an online programme, much effort has been put into ensuring provision of adequate, timely and appropriate services and information for students, enabling students to learn at their own pace and in their own time, and to take advantage of a wide range of Web resources. This programme has four notable aspects.

5.1 Programme orientation and information

Programme orientation lays the foundation for students' online independent learning with VEEP. An introduction 3-minute video about VEEP is produced, not just to impress but also to inform. The video adopts a student-friendly approach to informing students of the basic facts about VEEP, including what students can expect and what is expected of them, the why's and when's of the activities on the programme. Apart from the video, students also receive email from the Centre about programme details. The video and email give concise and accurate information to students, promoting communication between the Centre and the students.

5.2 Programme support (technical and administrative)

VEEP makes use of available technology at the university to produce an Internet-supported learning environment that can facilitate independent learning, and provide support service. With the help of the Information Technology Services Centre (ITSC), the ELC can then ensure timely assistance and support for students with problems related to technical issues, such as those related to assignment submissions and access to materials. Non-technical questions or issues from students are dealt with by ELC's administrative staff.

5.3 Programme Technology

Technology plays an important role in VEEP in data collection, the development, implementation and evaluation of the programme. Details of the background of the cohort of students who took part in VEEP in a certain year, students' rates of participation, a comparison of statistical data between different academic years, as well as incidences of irregular online learning behavior can easily be accessed for reference or future study. ELC teachers designs VEEP materials on iSpace, where all VEEP administration is also carried out. Detecting behavioral issues (such as unbecoming online conduct of abusing the 're-attempts' feature of the programme to second-guess answers, suspected plagiarism cases in language work, etc.) and implementing behavioral intervention (for example, flashing on the website a reminder of the importance of honesty in completing assignments) are made possible by the use of technology. At the end of the programme, students are requested to complete a feedback questionnaire online. Technology has allowed quick and efficient data collection and centralization, as well as efficient administration and timely dissemination of information and alerts.

5.4 Programme materials

To many students, English has often been a language that is taught inside the classroom. The freedom of when and where to complete VEEP challenges students' habitual way of learning English in the classroom, highlighting the notion that English is primarily learnt and not taught, and that one can pursue independent learning outside the classroom without teachers.

Regarding independent learning, affective skills are among the three key skills (cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective) identified by Zimmerman et al. (1996), and that motivation is considered an important affective skill as it is directly related to one's capacity for independent learning (Malone and Smith, 1996; Zimmerman, 2002; Bishop, 2006). To promote and maintain motivation, VEEP uses multi-media (e.g. incorporating songs, TED talks into activities) to arouse students' curiosity and interest, allowing students to experience real language use and atmosphere. Among the specific steps taken in this regard are:

- Giving weighting towards course assessment upon successful VEEP completion to recognize students' efforts
- Employing a variety of assessment types and modes (e.g. students selecting the best performance for assignment submission, completing gap-fills, recording speeches, writing short essays) to get students

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- interested in the tasks
 - Including varied, fun and interest or study related learning activities. Topics of learning activities are related to everyday life or students' studies in order to demonstrate relevance of the program, to arouse students' curiosity and to maintain their interest.
 - Presenting clear instructions and expectations. Evaluation rubrics and ways to assess performance are spelled out explicitly to help students gain a sense of control over what they produce.
 - Providing useful resource links and recommended readings to help students set their own goals, to achieve a sense of self-fulfillment and to appreciate the value of intrinsic motivation.

6. Implementation of the Programme and Issues at Various Stages

6.1 Implementation of the programme

Student progress is monitored during the VEEP period in summer and measures are taken to ensure its smooth delivery during the summer. Some such measures include:

- VEEP Promotion through the formal official channel in the university as well as Weibo/WeChat
- Personal email reminders to students who fail to start VEEP work in time
- Immediate response to irregularity reports (such as cheating and computer glitches)
- Regular updates on students' work completion during the VEEP period

VEEP delivery requires close work partnership among administrative, technical and teaching staff such as in offering timely assistance and providing solutions to problems that emerge during the course of VEEP delivery.

6.2 Issues faced by VEEP

6.2.1 *Developing content – quality and variety*

VEEP has been using a combination of graphics, video, sound and text to adopt interesting and new pedagogical approaches to creating engaging teaching input and learning materials. Student feedback has shown improvement in material and activities design over the past three years since the VEEP's official launch. Many students commented very positively on the relevance of the reading activities, the usefulness of the writing exercises, the interesting activities in both speaking and listening sections. However, many ELC teachers have yet to receive training on online instructional design to help them understand better how students learn online, how one can stimulate learning and harness technologies to enhance the quality of online learning experience. This has made recruitment for VEEP material designers a challenging task.

6.2.2 *Student readiness for online courses*

The student feedback has reflected a great variation in students' receptivity or responsiveness to VEEP, as well as students' capabilities to learn or study in a virtual learning environment, which requires students to plan and manage their own learning online. Meeting deadlines, gaining access to the Internet and mobile technologies – all this is among the issues that some students have to contend with on VEEP back in their hometown in China. Failure to overcome such hurdles on VEEP will definitely have a negative impact on the learning experience and on the determination to pursue learning independently.

6.2.3 *Infrastructure communication reliability*

VEEP online assignment grading has experienced problems, for example, the marking of written work on the Turnitin system could not be performed online and assistance from ITSC colleagues was needed. Some students reported difficulty in electronic assignment submission and some gave accounts of problems with accessing content materials. Access to the Wifi or broadband service, or even some online materials may be denied in some locations.

7. Students' Performance and Feedback on VEEP

7.1 Students' performance

VEEP ran for the third time in the past academic year 2017/2018. Performance of most students on VEEP in

all these years was more than satisfactory, with most achieving 40 or more out of 100 points. (Please refer to Appendix II.)

The good performance results have reflected students' strong abilities to succeed in online learning, and that the VEEP operational system is user-friendly and supportive enough to facilitate successful completion of the programme for most students. Since self-efficacy will increase when learners perceive they are performing satisfactorily (Schunk 1995), VEEP should have beneficial effects on students' development of self-efficacy beliefs, which are critical to the decision-making process, effort spent on a task, persistence and resilience in coping with difficulties or problems in learning (Bandura 1997).

7.2 Students' feedback

Students are invited to complete a post-VEEP questionnaire after VEEP completion. The evaluation form consists of 14 questions, with 12 quantitative in nature, using a 7-point Likert scale (from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) response scale, and 2 open-ended questions. (Please refer to Appendix III for the feedback survey questions.) Some key findings since the first running of VEEP three years ago:

- Students generally find the programme useful and the activities interesting. Many positive remarks are found in the open-ended questions.
- The two most popular language skills on this programme are Listening and Speaking, with 'fun' cited most frequently as an effective motivator.
- There is an absence of major negative comments on the learning environment, suggesting students' confident control or management of online learning.
- Learning resources receive very positive comments from students. This has suggested students' readiness to pursue learning on their own.

An analysis of students' satisfaction has revealed the following, which reflects the extent of programme effectiveness in increasing or sustaining students' motivation to complete VEEP:

- (a) Personality characteristics have an important bearing on a student's receptivity to the learning activities. The same activities could have received very mixed reactions – from enthusiastic to negative responses. A great many students thought the program was 'great', 'perfect', 'unique', whereas a couple of students failed to see the worth of spending time and effort on completing the programme.
- (b) Some students are more focused on their own agenda of learning, for example, getting higher grades in academic studies or in some external examinations. Correspondence of their agenda with the programme content could have been a strong determining factor of the presence or lack of motivation to work on VEEP.
- (c) Motivation of some students has been affected by frustration with the technical aspects of the program, such as difficulties experienced in submitting speaking assignments or in gaining access to online materials.
- (d) Some students (though merely a minority) have not yet fully appreciated the integration of learning into their daily lives. The perceived dichotomy of 'play' and 'work' has made it difficult for them to appreciate the value of completing the program during their summer vacation, generating a negative feeling towards VEEP and affecting their motivation to work on VEEP.
- (e) To some students, the programme is exceptional as indicated by a student's comment, 'I like this programme because it is actually what makes our university different from other universities'. It has demonstrated the uniqueness of the programme in the specific learning contexts as well as the potential of turning the program into a success model for future online courses in the ELC.
- (f) Some students have displayed strong self-motivation by expressing their wish to complete more activities on the programme or to receive instant feedback on their work. They possess capacity to manage their own learning and to monitor the progress of their learning.

(Please refer to Appendix IV for samples of students' responses to the feedback survey questions.)

8. Ways forward for a better VEEP

Students' feedback has given the VEEP teachers much thought about further programme enhancement, raising a number of questions related to student online learning:

- Reasons for some students' non-participation

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- Students' behavior when they work on VEEP (e.g. number of sittings for each learning episode or activity, duration of each sitting, popular times for online work, etc.)
 - Information and details on challenges faced by students (e.g. how, when or where students experienced problems with accessibility and stability of the online platform)
 - Students' beliefs and attitudes towards originality of work performance on the Programme
 - Use of online visuals (e.g. colour, graphics, images, etc.) for instructional, motivational and attention-focusing effects
 - User-friendliness of the online VEEP materials (e.g. the layout, menu structure, navigation, etc.)

To understand the focus of VEEP design and complications of VEEP implementation, one must appreciate the specific context at which VEEP took place. The restricted online access in the region is one example and the limited use of the English language in students' everyday life is another. There is, however, a strong belief among VEEP teachers that these constraints should not be taken as barriers to introducing and practicing a learning approach that is thought to be of value and conducive to students' cultivation of interest to learn and their development of learning potential in the English language.

Development of VEEP is about the process of creating an online environment that is conducive to learning. The essence of VEEP lies in its ongoing effort to equip students with learning skills that are fundamental to the digital age within the givens and constraints of the university's context. The VEEP team is working for a better VEEP that is more learner-oriented, meeting the learners' needs and wants.

9. Implications of VEEP as an Online Programme for Independent Learning

VEEP realizes the powerful ways in which the networked age can blur the distinction between formal and informal learning, and is making an attempt to make use of new possibilities of the 21st century learningscapes in the unique context of the university. Struggles to reconcile the ideals of independent eLearning (e.g. the use of dynamic interactive online learning media) with the realities of the eLearning infrastructure that are currently available on the campus have presented challenges to teachers whose job it is to design an effective online learning environment and materials. Yet, the encouraging student feedback has shown VEEP made significant, though small, steps in enriching students' English learning experience and improving students' language abilities.

VEEP is a programme that sets the stage for a culture of learning that goes beyond the confines set by time and location. Exploration of the use of information-rich networked learning environment to advance capability and to further develop self-confidence in English learning is the essence of VEEP. VEEP is not about controlling or monitoring what students will or can learn, but rather attempting to influence what the students will or can learn on their own. This explains an adoption of a non-punitive approach to assessment (e.g. allowing students to resubmit within a specified period their assignments to demonstrate their best performance), channeling efforts and energy into learning and doing one's best. It is also hoped this approach can reduce potential risks of having the programme being sabotaged by students through collusion or cheating for the sake of grade/mark attainment.

VEEP has adopted a content delivery approach, which is arguably the most appropriate given the specific learning support and contexts, and the clear aims of this 3-week programme. However, this does not preclude exploration of a more process approach capitalizing on more dynamic interactive possibilities offered by new technologies. Through thoughtful instructional design, VEEP is aiming to provide an educational experience which will promote academic integrity and help build a stronger foundation for life-long learning. As students are now immersed in a digital milieu, VEEP will keep looking for ways to harness technology to help students learn how to obtain a good and satisfying feeling about further developing their language skills and using these skills in their academic and daily life.

While students need time, training and experience to become acclimatized to the online learning environment, teachers understand their responsibilities for students' online learning that includes blending technology, content, instructional practices and pedagogical approaches. Making learning in a technology mediated environment graphically appealing and learner-friendly is among the goals of many a VEEP teacher. It seems obvious that receiving technological know-hows and/or engaging in extensive

professional development is no longer a choice, but an obligation if independent online learning is to become part of the learning culture.

10. Insights into e-Learning in a Formal Curriculum

In the past three years, the ELC has been on a journey to seek and adopt relevant pedagogical practices in the online VEEP. Unlike most assignments in a formal curriculum where success is dependent on the quality of the 'product' produced by students – be it of written or spoken performance, VEEP emphasizes the experience of an individual's learning. VEEP accepts the role of effort and perseverance, trial and error, and even the willingness to take risks on the course of learning. Driven by this mindset, VEEP has implemented a variety of approaches that were felt relevant to the programme and the context. The rich experiences that the VEEP teachers obtained have been inspiring and gratifying. The ELC has been reflecting critically on the elements of change (from initial instructional design to long-term iterative programme improvement with data from the learning management system) that have characterized the practices on VEEP to attempt to understand more fully ways to support teachers with their VEEP work. The ELC has come to recognize the necessity of some shifting in perspectives in order to embrace change, or to arrive at a shared sense of purpose and direction as a community of practice in teaching and learning among faculty members. An example of such a shift can be found in an alternative understanding of 'school/term time' and 'school/course work' as demonstrated by VEEP.

VEEP has reminded us that, with the existence of eLearning, one's pursuit of academic studies, acquisition of knowledge or skills are not going to be bound by the time factor, urging us to revisit the significance of institutionalized 'break time' or 'end-of-term breaks' in the official academic calendar in students' studies. Yet, 'breaks' and 'holidays' may not necessarily be any time-off for students, with students stopping their studies or learning. This issue prompts us to reconsider the notion of 'work' and 'play' in an academic context.

'Work' is usually thought of as being obligatory, routine and/or boring, devoid of free will or choice and is often related to efforts in an activity; whereas 'play' is often associated with 'fun', enjoyable, liberating experience, allowing one to exercise choice and freedom and very often reflecting an emotional state of happiness or a sense of fulfilment. We often aim at finishing 'work' but hope to repeat the experience in 'play' process. To help students engage in learning beyond term time (that is, their official study period) like in VEEP, a change in students' perception of 'work' is needed. Giving an undertone of fun and light-heartedness and creating a 'play-ful' or meaningful, relevant online experience via an appropriate instructional approach have seemed to be generally successful in dispelling negative sentiments conjured up by 'work'. This is evidenced by students' requests for further online useful resources to repeat and extend their learning experience, and their positive comments on various learning tasks. The online landscape offers teachers huge opportunities to look for enjoyable or thought-provoking learning places to sustain students' motivation to learn.

Although features of conventional schooling (such as fixed classrooms, uniform curriculums, set timetables and the hierarchical year-groups) still dominate, today's educational landscape is on the cusp of a pedagogical shift from a more physical to virtual nature, trading bricks and mortar for online learning management platforms. There is an alternative teaching agenda that suggests a focus shift from producing good students to developing successful learners. Before students can benefit from the wonders of learning in the digital world to learn anytime and anywhere, they need to equip themselves with the mind-set and relevant skills of learning in the 21st century. To bring e-learning into mainstream, a reliable infrastructure, technological experts and academic staff with a knowledge of instructional website design are among the essentials of success – this has been duly discussed in a descriptive account of VEEP in this paper. It is obvious that the impact of technology can be felt at different levels of a programme or a course, and that the benefits students obtain through the use of educational technologies are very much dependent upon how the technologies are used to facilitate student learning. To bring eLearning into mainstream, helping academic staff to acquire expertise in using technologies effectively to improve student learning seems to be a fundamental step.

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Appendix I

Speaking Assessment

The learning outcome of this exercise is to reproduce spoken English, with correct articulation (clear sounds), stressing and intonation.

Text and audio for these exercises have been checked for discrepancies and have been found to be correct, if there is a difference between what you read and what you hear this is a learning experience and is probably due to the dialect of the speaker. Please use this opportunity to listen to and understand more about the subtleties of different accents.

Introduction

[Assessment, procedure and timing Page](#)

Instructions on what to do for your speaking assessment.

TASKS

There are three passages. Practise recording each of them in turn until you have a recording with which you are happy. **Multiple submissions are allowed. Only your last recording submitted will be for grading.**

SPEAKING TASK 1



[The Owl and the Pussycat File](#)




[The Owl and the Pussycat File](#)

SPEAKING TASK 2



[Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone File](#)

 [Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone audio File](#)

SPEAKING TASK 3

 [News Report Audio File](#)

 [News Report audio File](#)

RECORD PASSAGE

[Click here to record passage Assignment](#)

ADDITIONAL SPEAKING RESOURCES

[Material to help you complete the task Page](#)

Explanation of articulation (clear sounds), stressing and intonation.

Appendix II

Students' Performance for the Past Three Years

Year	Total No. of Students	No. & % of Students with Less-than-satisfactory Performance *
2018	1596	100 6.27%
2017	1417	51 3.60%
2016	1423	95 6.68%

*Activity scores obtained at the end of the programme are at or less than 40 out of 100 points.

Appendix III

Student feedback survey questions:

Tick the appropriate boxes from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' to indicate your opinions on the following statements, and answer 2 open-ended questions to express your views.

- I have a clear understanding of what I am expected to learn in each exercise.
(1) strongly agree (2) agree (3) somewhat agree (4) neutral
(5) somewhat disagree (6) disagree (7) strongly disagree
- The learning input is easy to understand.
- There is a variety of activities.
- The difficulty level of the learning activities/exercises is about right.
- The learning activities/exercises are useful.
- The learning activities are interesting.
- The instructions are clear.
- The multimedia learning materials are directly related to the focus of each learning unit.
- The multimedia learning materials can be accessed easily.
- The learning materials have increased my interest in improving my language skills independently.
- The learning materials have increased my experience in using on-line language learning resources.
- The learning materials have helped to increase my confidence in using the language.
- What do you like most/least about the VEEP learning materials? Please give reasons.
- Is there any suggestion that you would like to make regarding the on-line materials and/or learning experience?

Appendix IV

(A) Students' responses to survey questions

Year		2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
No. of participants		1423	1417	1596
No. & Percentages of Respondents		380(26.7%)	677(47.78%)	881(55.2%)
I have a clear understanding of what I am expected to learn in each exercise.	strongly agree + agree	81.05%	90.10%	84.22%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.58%	0.74%	0.8%
The learning input is easy to understand.	strongly agree + agree	74.74%	83.31%	78.77%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.32%	0.74%	0.56%
There is a variety of activities.	strongly agree + agree	85.53%	90.99%	86.83%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.58%	0.59%	0.8%
The difficulty level of the learning activities/exercises is about right.	strongly agree + agree	76.32%	82.72%	78.09%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.84%	1.18%	1.14%
The learning activities/exercises are useful.	strongly agree + agree	77.37%	82.87%	77.3%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.84%	1.03%	1.25%
The learning activities are interesting.	strongly agree + agree	68.42%	76.51%	71.28%
	strongly disagree + disagree	2.37%	0.89%	1.93%
The instructions are clear.	strongly agree + agree	80.26%	86.85%	81.27%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.84%	0.59%	1.14%
The multimedia learning materials are directly related to the focus of each learning unit.	strongly agree + agree	78.42%	85.23%	78.66%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.32%	0.59%	1.02%

The multimedia learning materials can be accessed easily.	strongly agree + agree	73.42%	82.57%	75.26%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.84%	0.89%	1.59%
The learning materials have increased my interest in improving my language skills independently.	strongly agree + agree	73.68%	81.54%	74.12%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.84%	1.33%	0.91%
The learning materials have increased my experience in using on-line language learning resources.	strongly agree + agree	78.16%	86.41%	79%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.32%	1.03%	0.68%
The learning materials have helped to increase my confidence in using the language.	strongly agree + agree	72.37%	80.50%	71.17%
	strongly disagree + disagree	1.32%	0.74%	1.47%

(B) Samples of student responses showing recurrent themes in each language skill

(i) Favourable comments from students

Listening

- Listening gives me a nice English listening experience
- The listening materials are interesting.
- I like the listening most. Because it is useful and funny.
- (I like) Listening activity because I consider it not only challenging but also interesting.
- I like the listening part mostly, especially the song. Because it is never a boring exercise and I also relax myself.
- The most I like is the multimedia learning materials in listening. Because it is interesting and draws your attention.
- There are a lot of interesting materials for me to improve my listening skill, thank you!

Speaking

- (I like) Speaking (most). It is really very interesting.
- I like the material which (is) in speaking part. Through the process of learning about this part, I have known some useful skills about speaking, which make me have more confidence in speaking.
- I like the speaking part because I didn't have this kind of homework before.
- I like the speaking part most, because usually I don't have many reasons to record my own voice.
- (I like) The tips on speaking (most). Because it is useful.

Reading

- (I like) Reading (most), because it gives me a chance to learn new words and expressions.
- (I like) Reading (most). Because I think it is useful.
- (I like) Reading (most). Because it is very fun.
- (I like) The reading part (most). Because I can find lots of materials that I am interested in while learning.
- (I like) the reading resource. They are very useful and interesting
- (I like) external links and list of recommended readings (most). Give students more materials to read and learn.
- My most like materials are reading articles. Because these articles are related to my major (study).
- I like reading resources (most). These can help improve my reading ability.
- The reading and listening materials can enhance my English skills. It can help me get in touch with English during holidays.

Writing

- I like the writing most, because I can write with my imagination and wishes. The process of writing is very enjoyable.
- What I like the most is writing part, because I got many writing skills from it and improve a lot.
- I like writing (most) because it is very interesting that I feel relaxed.
- The writing part is the most helpful for me about the VEEP learning materials, because the external link helps me a lot.
- I like the writing part most. It inspires me to write interesting paragraphs.
- I like the writing part most because of the activities in this part is interesting and useful.
- I like the writing part most, because I did learn something new and I can write on my own style.

(ii) Less-than-favourable comments from students

Listening

- Macbook cannot perfectly support Flash, which bring great inconvenience to students who use Macbook. I suggest using HTML5 instead of Flash.
- The video of listening test couldn't be played in some browsers.
- The listening part is difficult and parts' sound is not clear.
- The listening material is not enough.
- The listening part is too difficult
- The listening part is not that friendly to iOS users.

Speaking

- What I like the least is speaking part, because the learning material is not enough for me.
- The least I like is the technical problem.
- When I do the speaking part, the quality of the recording depends on the kinds of browser.



Reading

- I hope the reading materials and questions can be put in the same page.
- The reading part is inconvenient to work with, maybe you should put the article in the quizzes.
- More interesting reading materials!
- The reading materials can have more varieties.

Writing

- Some parts of writing are not quite useful.
- I dislike the writing for it is the hardest and most troublesome.
- More advice for academic writing.
- Some parts of writing are not quite useful.
- The writing task is a little bit confusing.
- Least like: writing boring

Authors' Backgrounds

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