

CHOOSING POTENTIAL STUDENTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD: COULD WE SKYPE THEM?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the advantages and some limitations of using Skype for interviewing potential students from abroad for the BEd (TESL) program (Session 2012/2013) at the Faculty of Education, University Malaya, Malaysia. This first attempt by the faculty was initiated as a result of the problems faced in phone-interview sessions with previous applicants. In this attempt, ten out of 34 applicants were shortlisted for an interview. These ten applicants were from various parts of China, Japan, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Yemen. Interviewers were two lecturers and the co-ordinator of the TESL programme from the Department of Language and Literacy Education. Throughout the interview duration of 2 hours, challenges and potentials were recorded and noted. These records show many advantages and only minor limitations faced during the interview session. The experience resulted in positive feedbacks for the faculty management and administration, particularly in relation to offering places to future TESL students at the university. This experience could be one of many more to be carried out for finalizing future enrolment at this university and, perhaps, others too.

Keywords: Skype, interview, students, university.

1 THE CHAOS

The B Ed TESL program at the University of Malaya focuses on producing English language teachers for secondary schools. The four-year program aims to provide TESL teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills to become English teachers and thus contribute to Malaysia's status in an increasingly globalized world. In the past years, TESL students have been interviewed by faculty members or university members after being shortlisted from a list of applications. The potential candidates' success in interviews depended on how well they could communicate with the interviewers on various topics. The aim of the interview was to ensure that candidates who enrol into the program have the necessary communicative skills to be TESL students and future teachers of English for the nation. However, several significant problems have surfaced in recent years. These problems surfaced because of the rising number of applications from abroad. The University has had an influx of applications from China, Taiwan, Korea, Iran, Japan, and even a few from countries like Brunei Darussalam, and the U.S.A.. As previously interviews were carried out face to face with Malaysian students, the faculty has had a number of problems dealing with international applicants who were restricted by temporal and geographical distances. Students were therefore either accepted into the program based only on their International English language tests, such as IELTS or TOEFL, or based on the grades presented in their academic results scripts from high schools or Diplomas. Unfortunately, some of these students had difficulties following the subjects in the program, understanding lectures, and completing assignments, mostly because of their low level of English language proficiency, particularly in their listening and speaking skills. These students' difficulties with the above have made it very challenging for academics to proceed with their teaching or in their dealings with such students. More consultation time and guidance had to be provided for students who needed assistance, and thorough, detailed and repeated explanations of ideas and theories had to be done in and out of the classroom. Teaching learning therefore became somewhat like in high school where handholding was required at all times. Realizing this, the faculty decided to add a feature of telecommunications technology to filter through shortlisted candidates. The telephone was used for interviewers to converse with potential students from overseas. One would think that the biggest challenge would be in terms of cost as it became very expensive to make international phone calls at the expense of the faculty. Interestingly, however, the high cost of the phone calls was not the biggest issue. There have been cases where potential students were replaced by someone else in the phone interviews, subjecting the interviewers to a 20-30 minutes interview session with someone else. The faculty only uncovered this scheme when it was discovered that students enrolled into the program could not converse in English as well as they did in the interview session. This made phone calls

unreliable in determining potential students' communicative skills or identity. There have also been cases where potential students were coached by a teacher or an English speaker while an interview was being conducted. These whispers which were parroted by the interviewees were unpleasant to listen to by interviewers from the other side of the world: Malaysia. The faculty then, decided to send interviewers to the countries of the applicants so that interviews could be made face to face. If there were 40 potential students from one country, it would be cost effective to fly an interviewer over to conduct interviews sessions. However, when there were only 2 or 3 potential students, it did not make sense to spend for these sessions. From the challenges above, it became clear that interviewing international applicants has become a nuisance, as one way (sending interviewers abroad) was not cost effective and the other (making phone calls) was unreliable.

2 THE LIGHT

In light of the challenges, in Semester 1, 2011/2012 Session (February-June 2012), it was proposed that the faculty try using an online tool to carry out online interviews with potential students for the coming semester. Skype was suggested as it includes a variety of telecommunications systems that transmit voice, pictures, and data over internet connections. It can be a popular medium for conducting interviews, especially if interviewees are geographically dispersed, and the cost for travelling to them is high. Skype allows the interviewer to make free calls to interviewees who have Skype on their computers. It allows the interviewer and interviewee to see each other on the computer screen in real-time, and speak as if they were face-to-face. Despite this ease of access, Sellen (1995) argues that online video conferencing technologies (like Skype) do not replicate face-to-face, in-person interactions, because of a time lapse in visual cues such as head nods and eye gaze. According to Sedgwick and Spiers (2009), the time lapse affects interactions pertaining to conflict resolution and planning. However, in recent times, there has been improvement in tools like Skype as exemplified by Web 2.0 technologies (O'Reilly 2005; Rogers, Harper et al. 2009) (see 2.3.2). Skype's speed and simplicity have since improved, thus addressing concerns raised by Sedgwick and Spiers (2009) about time lapse and visual cues. For this study, Skype offered a fresh new dimension of interaction for interviewers and potential students as it enabled them to interact like they would face to face. Skype's video mode presented a real image of the interviewer with facial expressions and other visual cues that enriched conversations.

3 THE VIRTUAL INTERVIEWS THROUGH SKYPE

3.1 Preparations for the Interview Session

For the Skype interviews, ten potential students were shortlisted. Six was from China, one from Thailand, one from Japan, one from Bangladesh, and one from Yemen. The interviews were scheduled from 10am – 12pm (Malaysian time) on the 22nd of March 2012. Before the day of the interviews, these potential students were contacted and informed of the time and date of the interviews. They were also told that they needed to download Skype application and register for an id so that they would be able to 'Skype' with their interviewers. These potential students were then provided with the faculty's Skype id. Eight of these potential students emailed their Skype id to the faculty days before the scheduled interview session. On the day of the interview session, three interviewers from the Department of Language and Literacy Education, the Assistant Registrar for Undergraduate Studies, the Deputy Dean for Undergraduate Studies, one administrative staff, and one technical staff were present. They convened in a meeting room equipped with a projector, a screen, a notebook, and a mike. The mike was placed right in front of the notebook for easy access by the interviewers and the audio of the computer was set to 'loudspeaker' so that all in the room could listen to the session (see Photo 1).



Photo 1

The three interviewers leafed through the applicants' details: academic qualifications, country of birth, extra-curricular activities etc. and familiarized themselves with each applicant as they would a face to face interview session. Calls came in one after another and for each call, the interviewers clicked on the ACCEPT button and started the session.

3.2 The Interviews

3.2.1 Rachel (China)

Rachel Skyped in first and tried answering questions posed by the interviewers. The questions were about her family background, experience as a student, and the reason she wants to become a TESL teacher. From the session, it was discovered that Rachel has had the experience of studying English at University Malaysia Sabah, a university in the far eastern side of Malaysia. However, the interviewers found her incompetent and very weak in her conversational skills. She could not understand very basic questions posed to her and ended up describing something that was not asked of her. Rachel's application was unfortunately rejected.

3.2.2 Si Han (China)

Si Han called in second and was confident when describing her background and her future plans. She was pleasant in her demeanour and was clear and careful when answering each question posed to her. She made very few grammatical mistakes: 'I will story you' and 'We will communication with each other' but quickly fixed her mistakes during the interview itself. She understood all questions posed to her and explained her passion for the teaching profession. Si Han's application was accepted.

3.2.3 Yumuna (China)

Yumuna was 17 years old and had just graduated from high school. Despite obtaining a 'Very Good' for her English language subject from school, her communicative skills were poor and she could not understand most of the questions the interviewers had posed to her. Like Rachel, Yumuna's application was rejected as well.

3.2.4 Marisa (Japan)

Marisa Skyped in next and by her side, was her mother who quickly moved away from the camera when the session began. She was eloquent, clear, and sounded British in her conversation with us. Despite having just graduated from high school, she presented confidence, showed a lot of interest in the B Ed program and expressed clearly how keen she was to be a student in Malaysia. She shared that her mother was Malaysian while her father was Japanese, and that she still has family living in

Malaysia. She presented how proficient she was in her communication skills, therefore Marisa's application was accepted.

3.2.5 Yu Yang (China)

Yu Yang called in right after Marisa and handled the interview questions well. He was clear and related his ambition to be an English teacher in his country. The interviewers however, did not have a copy of his TOEFL results although it was stated in his application that he has taken and passed a TOEFL test. When asked about the test results, he immediately sent a softcopy of his results through Skype. As the Skype interview was synchronous, so was any attachment sent through during the interview. The interviewers and assistant registrar took note of his specific scores for his TOEFL results: Reading – 24, Listening – 19, Speaking – 17, and Writing – 24. His TOEFL test total score was 84. Yu Yang's application was accepted.

3.2.6 Wen Dan (China)

Wen Dan was an International Marketing student from University Malaysia Sabah, another student who has had the experience of studying in Malaysia, although on the far eastern side of Malaysia. He has a Diploma in International Marketing, but chose to apply a different field for a Bachelor's degree. His was not proficient in his spoken English and could not understand many of the questions posed to him. Wen Dan's application was turned down.

SILENZIO

The interview session was on hold for about half an hour as no calls came in after the interview session with Wen Dan. As interviewers took a break while waiting for the next interview, the assistant registrar called up an international education officer from China to check on one last potential student from Inner Mongolia. The international education officers are those in charge of handling Education Fairs in Chinese states and have helped Chinese students with their applications for university programs from other countries (e.g., Malaysia). However, it is noteworthy to mention here that the faculty has no information of any kind of assistance or if there were education officers to assist potential students from countries like Bangladesh or Thailand. If there were, they were not in touch with the faculty or the faculty's potential students at the time of writing.

3.2.7 Li Long (China)

At 11.30am, Li Long Skyped in from Inner Mongolia. He was 21 years old and as soon as his call was accepted, he explained that he was caught in a rush hour to get to an internet café for the online interview. As questions were asked, he shared how he wanted to be an interpreter in his country and this was the reason he applied for the program. When informed that this program produces English teachers and not interpreters, he rephrased his earlier reason, stating that he did not mind being an English teacher. His spoken English was poor and many of the interview questions were misinterpreted. Li Long's application was also unfortunately rejected.

3.2.8 Zakarya (Yemen)

Zakarya was the last to call in at 11.45am. He looked sleepy and dishevelled the moment he appeared on the screen. He was slumped on a sofa in a living room. When asked he informed that it was only 7am in Yemen. This was the only call which got disconnected a few times. Nevertheless, Zakarya kept calling in and continued with his interview session. There was noise in the background from where he was sitting and after getting disconnected one more time, the noise disappeared. The interviewers proceeded with their questions. Zakarya mumbled most of his answers and seemed hesitant when asked to provide his results transcript. Unlike Yu Yang, Zakarya had provided a copy of his results transcript but this photocopied version in the hands of the interviewers was unclear and many of the scores and grades appeared tampered. The scores listed were mostly 100% and the grades, A or A+. In Addition, these scores and grades had rectangular markings surrounding them making Zakarya's real transcript worth checking. The interview asked if he could attach a softcopy of his transcript but he declined saying that he did not have a softcopy of his transcript. The interviewers then asked if he could email his transcript some time later so that they could have a look at it, Zakarya agreed. The call then got disconnected one last time. The interviewers waited for awhile but Zakarya did not call back. The interviewers then tried calling him via Skype but there was no answer. His id showed that he was already offline. Zakarya's application was not approved or rejected for more than a week. The faculty did not receive any form of mails from Zakarya and did not manage to look through his real transcript, thus in the end decided to reject his application.

3.2.9 Shaifullah (Bangladesh) and Paridah (Thailand)

Shaifullah was in Malaysia at the time of interview, therefore chose to be present for the interview. His interview was carried out face to face thus shall not be discussed further here. Paridah was not in touch with the faculty from the day letters were sent to potential students informing them of the interview session. She did not call in on the day of the interview and her case shall not be further discussed here.

4 THE VERDICT

From the above discussion, Skype has proven to be a very useful tool for interviewing potential students from abroad for the faculty. The advantage of Skype does not stop at the video function which allows interviewers to see their potential students: the way they smile, sit, and carry themselves during interview sessions, but goes on to include other potentials like sending and receiving documents in real time as carried out by Yu Yang. This supports O'Reilly (2005) and Rogers et al (2009)'s stand against Sellen (1995) and Sedgwick and Spiers (2005)'s argument that Skype does not replicate face-to-face, in-person interactions, because of a time lapse in visual cues. The interviews in this study were not affected at all by time lapse. In fact, the potential students' expressions and gestures could clearly be seen during the session and helped make the interview session almost as if it was carried out face to face. Additionally, the identity of the potential students could be validated and there was no way another person could replace the potential students during the interview session. This was because the person on the screen had to be the same as the photo on the application forms and that in students' identity documents. There was also no chance for these potential students to have an interpreter coaching them while an interview session was carried out. The faculty decided to accept three applications and reject the other seven. Although two interviews did not happen through Skype, the other five did and this shows the potentials of Skype as a tool for interviewing students from overseas.

5 THE FUTURE OUTLOOK

While the current ways of setting up the interview session via Skype were advantageous to the sessions carried out in this study, it is worth noting that in the future, each session should be organized to suit the time of the country from where the students are Skyping. If potential students are from Yemen, for example, it is best to avoid early hours of Yemen time. The Skyping should therefore be carried out in the afternoon of Malaysian time so that potential students from Yemen could call in at about 9 or 10am (Yemen time). Another thing worth noting is that some potential students may not have easy access to the internet much less a computer and Skype applications. It would be worthwhile checking or calling those who did not contact the faculty upon receiving the letter about the interview via Skype. There may also be interruptions in the interview session because of bad connections on either side of the countries. It is best to ensure that the computer or notebook used for Skyping has a faster processor for better synchronicity and that the internet connection is in good order before the interview sessions. From the success of the interviews carried out in this study, the faculty has decided to carry out future interviews via Skype. The faculty shall keep recording potentials and challenges of using Skype for interviewing potential students from abroad and produce papers in the hope that other faculties in a similar situation would be able to emulate what was done at the faculty. Potential research on other types of technology for interviewing such students are welcome.

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