THE USE OF *HOT POTATOES* IN TEACHING DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS TO EFL SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: The present study explored the effectiveness of teaching descriptive texts through *Hot Potatoes* to English as a foreign language (EFL) secondary school students and their perception of learning using this media. 31 junior high school students in Year VII participated in the study. A quasi-experimental with pretest -posttest design and a qualitative descriptive design were used in this inquiry. The results indicated that the use of *Hot Potatoes* to teach descriptive text to secondary school students was effective, pretest (M=74.74, SD=10.23) posttest (M=89.55, SD=5.96) *t*(30)=-10.97, p=.000 and that it was perceived to be useful and interesting teaching media by the students. These suggest that *Hot Potatoes* has potential benefits when incorporated into teaching of reading where the teachers can take it into account to be employed in their reading class.

Keywords: *Hot Potatoes, descriptive texts, EFL Secondary School Students*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini membahas efektivitas pengajaran teks deskriptif dengan menggunakan media *Hot Potatoes* dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) kepada siswa sekolah menengah pertama dan persepsi belajar mereka terhadap penggunaan media ini. penelitian melibatkan 31 siswa sekolah menengah pertama Kelas VII. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kuasi-eksperimental dengan pra-test dan post-test, dan dengan rancangan penelitian deskriptif kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan *Hot Potatoes* dalam pengajaran teks deskriptif bagi siswa sekolah menengah pertama adalah efektif, dengan nilai pretest (M=74.74, SD=10.23) post-test (M=89.55, SD=5.96) *t*(30)=-10.97, p=.000 dan dipandang sebagai media pengajaran yang berguna dan menarik oleh siswa. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa *Hot Potatoes* memiliki manfaat potensial ketika dipadukan ke dalam pengajaran membaca di mana para guru dapat mengandalkannya untuk digunakan di dalam kelas membaca.

Kata Kunci: *Hot Potatoes, descriptive texts, EFL Secondary School Students*

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of computer and internet technology in educational activities has been widely acknowledged to contribute to improve teaching-learning process. Among the varieties of programs available for this purpose, *Hot Potatoes* has been widely known in assisting language teaching.

Produced by Half-Baked Software, Inc., *Hot Potatoes* was designed to allow teachers to make interactive activities for students. It uses both HTML and JavaScript, yet no programming knowledge is required to make the web-based exercises. There are six different applications in the software suite, JMatch (matching exercise), JQuiz (text-entry quiz), JMix (jumbled-word exercise), JCross (crossword), JCloze (fill-in-the-blank exercise), and the Masher (mix and combine all the exercises). Hot Potatoes is not a new program. In fact, it has been released since 1998 (Soleimani & Raeesi, 2015) and the latest beta version is Hot Potatoes 7.0 for Windows released in May 2019 (see https://hotpot.uvic.ca/). It is free for nonprofit organizations and educational institutions with small units of activities that can be created. The paid version, however, allows more features and more units of activities to be made.

Some researchers conducted a review of Hot Potatoes for its potential benefits in language teaching (e.g. Petrides, 2009; Soleimani & Raeesi, 2015; Winke & MacGregor, 2001; Vargas & Monge, 2014). In her review, Petrides (2009) describes how Hot Potatoes may be used by language teachers, how the features are relevant to language activities, and how various activities in the program may satisfy all types of learners –learner styles and multiple intelligences. Soleimani and Raeesi (2015) highlight the positive and negative aspects of the program. The positive aspects include quick and immediate feedback it provides to every single question, a hint of the test items, posting and displaying test result on the web, and audio-visual files integrated capabilities. The negative ones are that its value depends largely on the knowledge and creative skills of the users, it concerns the statistical analysis and the security of the tests, and it is deficient in providing synchronous interaction between teacher and learner.

Departing from three questions, Winke and MacGregor (2001) evaluate the program –whether the program permits the creation of language learning exercises that are consistent with second language acquisition theory, whether the program is user friendly, and whether the program is appropriate for language testing. They maintain that *Hot Potatoes* can increase the amount of exposure to and potential interaction with the target language outside of the classroom context. The exercises created on it could form the basis of task-based activities. Thus, it supports task-based instruction where students are engaged in tasks with a primary focus on content rather than language (see Long, 1996) and focuses on meaning, provides a communication problem to solve, has a relationship to real-world activities, and is not concerned with language display (see Skehan, 1998). Winke and MacGregor (2001) point out that *Hot Potatoes* is logical and easy to use –no programming and advanced knowledge is required for users to familiarize with the modules since all modules share basic features, learning one of the *Hot Potatoes* modules makes it easy to learn the other five. Nevertheless, for the language testing purposes, Winke and MacGregor (2001) do not recommend using this program as no provisions to prevent the student from cheating and no security measures are provided. Moreover, the teachers cannot identify students' strengths and weaknesses in that the program does not include detailed

information regarding students' responses to individual items.

Likewise, Vargas and Monge (2014) believe that *Hot Potatoes* is prominent since it is user friendly, customizable, and compatible with various operating systems; it even comes with its own tutorials and sample exercises for users to start learning to develop activities with it. They argue that *Hot Potatoes* promotes learner autonomy. Several recommendations were made concerning the use of *Hot Potatoes* in reading course- i.e. to work with individual activities, to develop a didactic unit for students to work on it in a computer lab or at home as homework, and to integrate into Moodle-based platform if the educational institution has its own course support.

Considering the potentials of *Hot Potatoes* in language teaching as discussed above, the present study attempts to explore its efficacy when it is used to teach reading to EFL secondary school students and to find out students' perception of learning using this media. A better understanding of students' perceptions of *Hot Potatoes* used in learning descriptive text has important pedagogical implications for reading instruction in EFL context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quasi-experimental with pretest and posttest design. 31 EFL junior high school students in Year 7 participated in the study. Multiple choices reading test was used as an instrument to measure students' reading comprehension of descriptive text in both pretest and posttest. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the students' scores of reading comprehension prior to using *Hot Potatoes* and after using *Hot Potatoes* in the reading activities.

Following the posttest session, a Likert scale questionnaire containing of ten statements on how students perceive

learning descriptive text using *Hot potatoes* was distributed to students –to explore their perception on learning descriptive text using *Hot Potatoes.*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
A. EFL Students' Reading Comprehension after Using *Hot Potatoes*

The result of a paired-samples *t* test of EFL student's reading comprehension of descriptive text is presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=74.74, SD=10.23) and posttest (M=89.55, SD=5.96) after using *Hot Potatoes*; $t(30)= -10.97$, p = .00.

Table 1. Paired-samples *t* test of EFL students' reading comprehension

				Paired Differences				
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	SEM	Lower	Upper	t	df	
P1 – P2	-14,80	7,51	1,34	-17,56	-12,05	-10,97	30	,00

Abbreviations:
P1 =Pretest   SD = Standard Deviation
P2 =Posttest   SEM= Standard Error Mean

As a p-value was less than 0.05, it was statistically significant and indicated strong evidence that the use of *Hot Potatoes* to teach descriptive text to secondary school students was effective. The students well-understood the material on descriptive text delivered through *Hot Potatoes*. Figure 1 shows EFL students' reading comprehension scores of pretest and posttest.
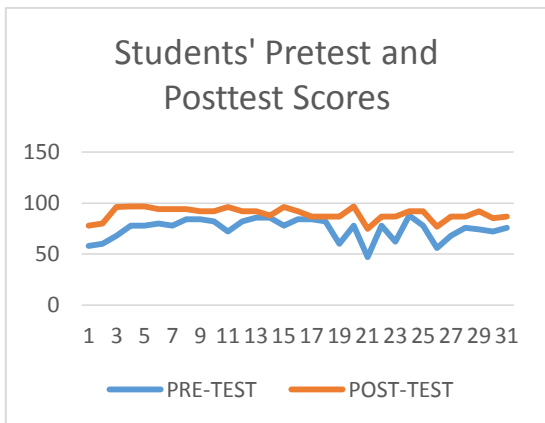
Figure 1. EFL students' reading
comprehension scores of pretest
and posttest

In line with the previous review (i.e. Petrides, 2009; Soleimani & Raeesi, 2015; Winke & MacGregor, 2001; Vargas & Monge, 2014)of *Hot Potatoes* for its potential benefits in language teaching, this research finding indicated that *Hot Potatoes* indeed promote acquisition of language features of descriptive texts. The language features of descriptive texts, as Knapp and Watkins (2005) point out, include the use of present simple, action verbs (e.g. run, walk, sleep), relational verbs (e.g. is, are, has, have), mental verbs (e.g. feel, like), adjectives, and adverbs. Figure 2 shows a sample of JCloze activity on *Hot Potatoes.* As shown in Figure 2, students practiced completing descriptive text in the gap-filling format. They could check their completed answers once they had finished. Hint button feature is provided in the JClose activity for students to get a clue for the answer, however they will lose points if they ask for hints or clues.
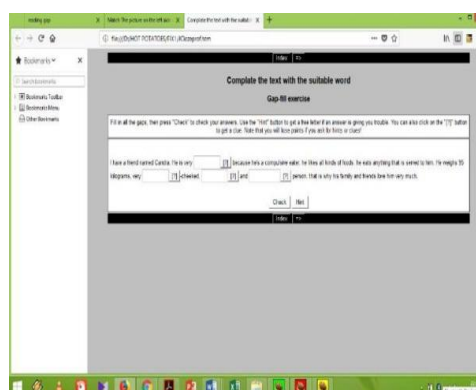

Figure 2. A sample of Jcloze activity

Using *Hot Potatoes*, the students are more likely to share with the teacher and their classmates about the tasks they are doing, the difficulties they meet, and the discoveries they make. Figure 3 presents situation where students worked with *Hot Potatoes* application in the class. Hamilton (2015:5) contends that this situation "allows students to practice the life skill of teamwork, while making deeper connections with each other than a teacher alone could instigate". It is common that when the task is engaging, the students talk more productively. Yang (2010) adds that by using a web-based application like *Hot Potatoes,* the students can earn much more language data which later enables them to remember better and use the language they learn through resources on internet.

Figure 3. Students completing activities
on *Hot Potatoes* application

B. EFL Students' Perception of Using *Hot Potatoes* in Learning Descriptive Text

The result of questionnaire investigating students' perception of using *Hot Potatoes* in learning descriptive text is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Perception of Using *Hot Potatoes* in Learning Descriptive Text

No.	Perception on *Hot Potatoes*	Responses			
		1	2	3	4
1	I enjoyed learning descriptive text using *Hot Potatoes*	21,9%	68,8%	9,4%	-
2	*Hot Potatoes* is an interesting software to learn English	40,6%	50%	9,4%	-
3	I understand English better by using *Hot Potatoes*	28,1%	53,1%	18,8%	-
4	My scores on reading was higher after using *Hot Potatoes*	25%	53,1%	18,8%	3,1%
5	I comprehended the content of the text better after using *Hot Potatoes* as a method of learning	28,1%	53,1%	18,8%	-
6	I am likely to be more active in learning English by using *Hot Potatoes*	28,1%	43,8%	21,9%	6,3%
7	I paid more attention to the learning material delivered through *Hot Potatoes*	21,9%	53,1%	21,9%	3,1%
8	I am enthusiatic about learning descriptive text using *Hot Potatoes*	21,9%	53,1%	21,9%	3,1%
9	Range of applications in *Hot Potatoes* is highly relevant to learn descriptive text	32,3%	51,6%	16,1%	-
10	*Hot Potatoes* is easy to learn/ to operate	40,6%	40,6%	15,6%	3,1%

Notes:
1 = strongly agree
2 = agree
3 = disagree
4 = strongly disagree

As shown in Table 2, students perceived that learning descriptive text using *Hot Potatoes* was joyful. They also considered *Hot Potatoes* interesting software for learning English. Many of them felt that they understood English better by using *Hot Potatoes*. Regarding the scores the students got in their reading comprehension test after using *Hot Potatoes*, the students mainly claimed that their scores improved.

On the statement whether or not the content of the text delivered through *Hot Potatoes* was better comprehended by the students, more than half of them responded agree. The students acknowledged that they felt more active in learning English and paid more attention to the learning material when conveyed through *Hot Potatoes*. This web-based software was also regarded as relevant to learning descriptive text, easy to operate, and fun for majority of students.

Students' perception of using *Hot Potatoes* in learning descriptive text was overall positive. This is the possible answer to how the students improved their ccomprehension of the descriptive text delivered through *Hot Potatoes*. Positive perception or positive belief is closely associated with success. Puchta (2010) notes that in language learning, the students who have positive beliefs will be

more likely to succeed than those who do not. Positive beliefs tend to lead the students to generate their own learning. Successful learners, as Oxford (2003) asserts, establish understanding of beliefs about the processes of language learning, the abilities they have, and effective learning strategies they use both in and out of the classroom.

In addition, Leger and Storch's (2009) study on willingness to communicate (WTC) indicated that the students' perception of the speaking activities influenced students' WTC in various ways. This affirms that students' perception of learning activities is important to explore and to understand by the teachers since it can help the teachers design appropriate activities for students. In this sense, Hawkey (2006) suggests that the more the teachers know about what is perceived to be happening in the classroom, the better the teachers' chances are of improving the quality of language learning and use.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the use of *Hot Potatoes* in teaching descriptive text to EFL students is effective and is perceived positively by the students. This quasi-experimental study confirms the potential benefit of this web-based software for language learning. The acquisition of language features of descriptive texts by the students is evidence for its contribution to language learning context. Positive perception by the students of this software is most likely the factor influencing them to succeed in comprehending descriptive text better. This study therefore supports the theory of second language learning motivation, which places motivation as the most significant factor in language learning attainment.

The finding of this study, however, is not applicable to any language learning context. When the software is used in different language skills and/or features, it may result in different finding. For this reason, further study is required to validate the previously investigated areas. Also, the setting of the study may contribute to the variability of the finding. In this study, the setting was EFL students enrolling at the state junior high school 4 Mojokerto. The characteristics of the students may vary according to their geographical location, social interaction, and social class. The future study may include these factors to supplement this study.

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