

**BRIDGES TO SWAZILAND:
USING TASK-BASED LEARNING AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED
INSTRUCTION TO IMPROVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING
AND LEARNING**

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Abstract

One way to provide high quality instruction for underserved English Language Learners around the world is to combine Task-Based English Language Learning with Computer-Assisted Instruction. As part of an ongoing project, “Bridges to Swaziland,” these approaches have been implemented in a determined effort to improve the ESL program for Orphans and Vulnerable Children at a mission school in Swaziland, Southern Africa. In addition to providing staff development for Swazi teachers and staff, the project director and her students have worked directly with OVC and also created a number of digital tools, designed to encourage discussion, facilitate cooperative learning and inspire English Language use in a meaningful and culturally relevant context. Results, while limited, indicate that application of the two approaches, TBLL and CALL has increased the confidence of teachers and improved student motivation and achievement.

Keywords: Task-based Language Teaching; ICT; European-funded projects; project evaluation; CEFR.

1. Introduction

Task-based Language Learning (TBLL) has grown tremendously in popularity over the past fifteen years (Misred & Mohamed, 2014). TBLL is characterized by the use of content-oriented activities, the provision of supportive feedback and consideration of linguistic forms in the context of actual language use. This approach promotes meaningful use of target language and communicative competence rather than mastery of discrete skills. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has also gained in popularity and use. Questions concerning whether to use computers in language teaching have been replaced with conversations concerning best practice. Over a decade ago, Chappelle (2001: 2) stated that “[...] anyone concerned with second language teaching and learning in the 21st century needs to grasp the nature of the unique technology-mediated tasks learners can engage in for

language acquisition [...]”. Since then, computer technology has increasingly facilitated the use of innovative learning tools in the language classroom, for example, in the creation of multi-media presentations, videos, web-based wikis, WebQuests and blogs.

Despite potential advantages to combining CALL with TBLL, however, there have been few references to CALL in the growing body of research on task-based language teaching and vice versa (Thomas & Reinders, 2010). Nevertheless, the synergy of the two approaches has tremendous power and can make a difference in the design of lessons and activities for English language learners. As pointed out by Lai and Li (2011: 499), “communication and information technologies expand the range of tasks with online resources, enhance the authenticity of tasks and motivation for task implementation”.

This study examines the impact of integrating CALL and TBLL with English Language Learners (ELL) and their teachers at a mission school in Swaziland, Southern Africa as part of an ongoing partnership “Bridges to Swaziland.”

In Swaziland, English is a second language, used as both an official language and medium of instruction in schools. As noted by Mthethwa (2014), English-language teachers face the challenges of preparing learners to be proficient in both spoken and written English, as well as to perform well across all the disciplines. Instruction in English begins in Grade 3 and continues through high school. Progress to the next grade is contingent upon earning a passing score on the English grammar and literature portions of yearly examinations. If students receive high honors in every other subject but fail in English, they must repeat the grade. This practice has exacerbated the problems of AIDS orphans attempting to obtain an education.

In Swaziland HIV/AIDS has had a substantial and crippling effect upon the people, including school-aged children. Currently 27% of the population are HIV positive, 45% of the population of 1.2 million people are aged 18 and younger, and of those, half have been orphaned by the loss of one or both parents (UNICEF Swaziland Annual Report, 2013). While it is clear that education is critical to ending the vicious cycle of poverty within Swaziland, providing young people with the means of improving their own lives and rebuilding their communities, those who cannot demonstrate proficiency on English Language examinations are forced to leave school early.

Teachers at the mission school had reported to the author that the majority of their students were failing seventh grade and being denied access to secondary education because they could not pass English exams. Our task was to provide those teachers with skills and strategies they could use to reverse this trend. The practice of integrating CALL and TBLL

was thus introduced as part of their professional development in teaching English language skills to orphans and vulnerable children in primary and secondary school¹.

2. CALL and TBLL in the local context

There is a pressing need to improve educational opportunities for all children because it is the only way to break the cycle of social injustice within impoverished communities and nations. In recognition of this fact, the United Nations identified educating all children worldwide as the second of its eight Millennium Development Goals, stating, “poverty, gender and location are the most pervasive factors linked to disparities in school attendance” (United Nations Millennium Development Goals, 2014: 17).

This need is particularly acute in the Kingdom of Swaziland, where disproportionate numbers of students are orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). In this context, the term ‘orphan’ refers to any child under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents to AIDS; the term ‘vulnerable’ to those children “whose survival, well-being, or development is threatened by HIV/AIDS” (UNAIDS, UNICEF& USAID, 2004: 6). “The incidence of orphaning and vulnerability has long been a feature of the education system, but has grown dramatically in scale since the advent of the HIV and AIDS pandemic” (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2011: 22).

The current study is part of an ongoing effort to support English teachers at a small mission school by producing special, culturally responsive, digital tools, which foster OVC task-based learning. Over the past four years, the author and her students have produced materials with needs of OVC English Language Learners in mind. One example is a Swazi folktale presented in digital form, including directions for a follow-up task requiring cooperation, collaboration and discussion in English. Another example, personal narratives composed by OVC using multimedia tools, used to explain and discuss points of English grammar. On one occasion, students, guided by the author and their teacher used an “I Used To...But Now I...” template to share ways their lives had changed since early childhood. This exercise provided opportunities for discussion and reflection as well as review of English verb tense. Some digital tools have been delivered in person while others have traveled to Swaziland via flashdrives. This has been necessary because Internet access is severely limited at the mission.

¹ Sample materials and artifacts can be accessed online at <http://teachersusan.com/Swaziland/>.

It is important to remember that computers, tablets, and mobile phones are best used as tools that promote human-to-human interaction. Rather than using such devices to deliver pre-packaged curricula or to facilitate drills of basic skills, effective practitioners use them to provide compelling content that prepares learners for engaging language-based activities. Computers and mobile devices can be used to present a variety of materials including narrative, informational and expository texts, multimedia presentations, slideshows, and videos that expand learners' worlds and provide a springboard for teacher-mediated, student-centered activities which promote speaking, listening, reading and writing in authentic contexts. Students who use computers in language learning demonstrate more cooperative learning and motivation for the tasks at hand (Tiene and Luft, 2001).

It is also important to keep in mind that technology tools and applications that are familiar in developed nations may pose unique challenges in developing nations. Access to electricity may be sporadic, it is difficult to obtain essential accessories or spare parts, repair facilities are few and far between, and providing on-going training is limited due to lack of opportunities for online or face-to-face contact.

Small-scale m-Learning projects are currently taking place in African countries, although these are not well documented. The increasing practice of mobile learning springs from the fact that Africa's developing countries have the highest global rate of adopting mobile technologies (Shapshak, 2002). The growth of wireless infrastructure is enormous due to the lack of infrastructure for cabling for the Internet in rural areas in Africa (Brown, 2003).

As is the case in much of Africa, the mission in Swaziland lacks reliable and affordable Internet access. The use of mobile technology can improve and transform English Language Learning in this underserved place, provided "these technologies are designed and implemented in such a way that they are relevant to the social and cultural context of learning" (Keengwe & Bhargava, 2014: 737). At the mission school and hostel, creating and sustaining loving relationships are as important as improving academic achievement. It is critical that children who have lost their parents and survived unspeakable hardships know that their teachers and "Nannies" are trusted friends they can confide in and who will advocate for them. The use of mobile technology in this specific context must supplement rather than serve as a replacement for authentic language activities requiring the use of reading, writing, speaking and listening within a community of learners.

All over the world, inappropriate assessments may drive instruction and sabotage educational innovations in language learning. In Kenya, the government has articulated *Vision 2030*, calling for technology integration as a means of improving educational outcomes

throughout the country. As in Swaziland, however, schools in Kenya are still ranked on the basis of students' mean scores on national, paper and pencil tests. Administrators' positions are also dependent upon the mean scores of students in their schools. Gioko (2013) reports that the misplaced focus on exam scores has kept some well-equipped schools from using their computers. This could easily happen at the mission school in Swaziland.

Following the experience of supporting local teachers in adopting an integrated CALL and TBLL approach as part of their pedagogical practices, this study addresses two research questions:

1. How has the use of computer technology contributed to the professional development of English teachers working at the mission?
2. How has using a combination of CALL and TBLL impacted English Language Learning of OVC at the school in Swaziland?

3. Method and procedure

The setting for this study is a small mission in the Low Veld region of Swaziland that serves 127 OVC. A Bridge School and after-school programs have been established in order to meet the needs of students who require more academic support and individual accommodations than can be provided at the nearby, government-sponsored Catholic school. In the last two years, teen camps have been designed to provide additional support for students during school holidays.

Phase 1

Following a visit by 2 Swazi teachers to the United States in January 2011, the author and one other teacher traveled to Swaziland in June 2011 to work directly with ten teachers and 30 students, aged 10 through 17. The director of the mission informed us that all of the children had special needs related to losing one or both parents to AIDS and suffering physical and psychological hardships before coming to live at the mission. Many were attending school for the first time due to the circumstances of their lives. They were also struggling to learn English.

Over a fourteen-day period, CALL and TBLL approaches were used to design and implement English Language Learning activities for OVC who were part of the Bridge School and all grades Pre-K through 7 of the After-School Program. Workshops were conducted every morning for 7 consecutive school days. In the afternoons, new methods and materials were applied in work with the students. Digital tools were chosen and language-

based tasks were planned with the OVC's interests and special needs in mind. For example, a brief video depicting the life and work of Nelson Mandela, a leader who is highly revered in Swaziland was shared via laptop computers along with a PowerPoint presentation highlighting key English vocabulary from the video. Next, the students got engaged in small group discussions of what Mandela meant to them. After sharing out, small groups of students composed cinquain and bio poems summarizing their ideas about their hero. During the workshops, Swazi teachers applied CALL and TBLL principles to design activities for their students. Later they applied the ideas in their teaching. Part of our morning meetings were devoted to asking questions, raising concerns and sharing success stories.

Following the training sessions, a feedback questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was administered to the group of ten teachers. The semi-structured questionnaire was used to gauge the teachers' perceptions of the new pedagogies acquired during training.

Phase 2

In January 2012 three teachers from the mission visited us in the United States for cultural immersion and professional development. Then in January 2013, one of the teachers, who is also the lead teacher in the Bridge School, returned with three young adults from the mission. While in the United States our friends participated in cultural and academic enrichment programs. The Bridge School teacher also participated in professional development sessions and visited a school in the United States where CALL and TBLL were being used.

In January 2014, the author returned to Swaziland with 5 pre-service teachers and a colleague. This time we were responsible for planning and directing a four-day overnight camp for 100 teen-aged campers and English Language Learners, aged 13 through 22. Working as a team with seven Swazi teachers, all but one of whom had participated in the 2011 workshops, we used an adapted version of the *Bizworld* curriculum (www.bizworld.org/) to introduce an engaging task that would teach business basics while providing an authentic context for language learning. Our Swazi hosts chose the content. They believed OVCs would benefit from knowledge and skills related to managing money and establishing small businesses. We chose *Bizworld* because of ease and low cost of implementation. All of the supplies for the camp were purchased out of pocket and carried into Swaziland from the United States. It is important to note that the basic *Bizworld* curriculum was adapted to make it more culturally relevant before we took it to the mission. For example, "Biz-Bucks" became Swazi currency and instead of seeking financial support

from a venture capitalist, our young businessmen and women took their ideas before a government board comprised of Swazi officials.

Ten small companies of ten students each were formed on the first day of camp. OVCs were placed in these groups according to age and English proficiency, with an attempt to have equal numbers of boys and girls in each. During camp sessions, OVCs learned about how companies are formed and operate. They also produced and marketed a unique product (beaded and string bracelets).

The campers were able to negotiate most of the *Bizworld* tasks in their native language, SiSwati, but their advertisements and sales pitch to the Board had to be presented in English. As part of their work, the students in each company elected two officers to present their ideas and product to a “Government Funding Board.” As a result of their presentation, this Board agreed to fund the venture or deny the request. Two Swazi teachers assumed the role of the government officials, while cell phones, iPads and laptop computers provided tools for creating a compelling, multimedia presentation. We made sure all campers had a chance to use all of these tools. At the close of the camp, each group shared their work via the same laptop computer and projector provided by the author during the training experience in 2011.

It should be noted that while we succeeded in developing pedagogical tasks that were close to real-world tasks, engaged the students in cooperative learning and facilitated the growth of speaking, listening reading and writing skills, as a language teacher, I had some concerns. As Bruton (2005) suggested, students may not receive sufficient instruction in new grammar and vocabulary when a purely task-based approach is used. There also may not be enough interaction in English, as students typically use a lot of their L1 instead of applying the target language in group discussions and work sessions. Some students simply require more direct instruction in the target language to attain proficiency.

At the close of the camp, twenty campers (10 males and 10 females) (see Appendix 2), as well as 5 of the 7 Swazi teachers (see Appendix 3), were surveyed to determine their impressions of the program, particularly the efficacy of using the combination of CALL and TBLL to improve English Language proficiency. (Two Swazi teachers needed to return to their homesteads before surveys could be administered.)

4. Results and discussion

When asked to share their ideas after the workshop sessions, all 10 teachers responded positively to the three questions addressed in the post-training Teacher Feedback Questionnaire. Significant responses are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample responses from the post-training Teacher Feedback Questionnaire.

1. As a result of our workshops, what do you think about using computers to aid with ESL instruction?
 - a. *Teaching this way helps the children have confidence and it encourages them to create their own knowledge.*
 - b. *These are strategies that involve the learner and are exciting.*
 - c. *Learning to use the new strategies has not only helped in my teaching, but makes me feel empowered.*

2. What do you like best about using the digital tools?
 - a. *Through using the digital tools, I have learned about developing interest in the children.*
 - b. *The electronic material is more appealing-it provides variety.*
 - c. *They empower learners to improve, even unassisted.*

3. What differences do you observe in your students as you teach using the methods learned through our workshops?
 - a. *The children enjoy the lessons and have more fun.*
 - b. *The method encourages learners to participate in an active way.*
 - c. *It puts children in centre-they talk, ask questions and add new information to knowledge base.*

When asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with statements related to the use of CALL and TBLL, all teacher responses were again overwhelmingly positive as indicated in Figures 1-5.

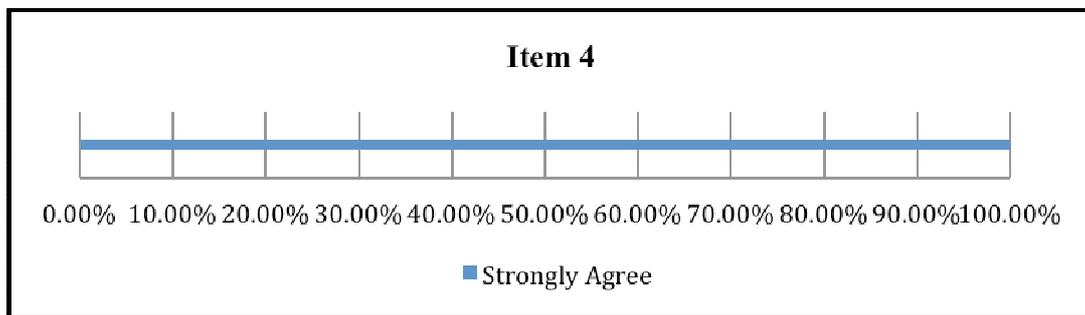


Figure 1. As a result of using the methods of teaching demonstrated, I feel more confident meeting the individual needs of my students.

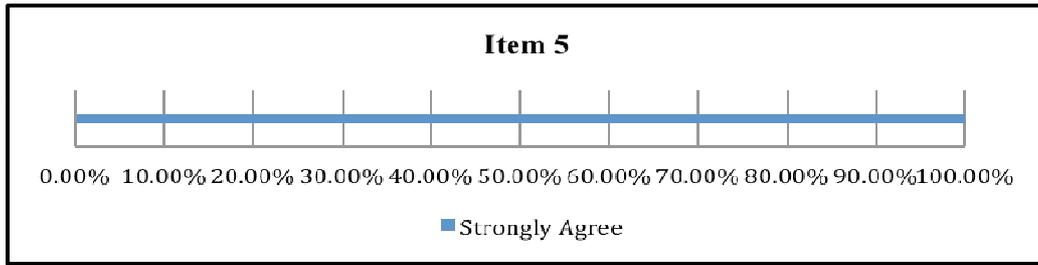


Figure 2. When I use computer technology with my students, their motivation and achievement increase.

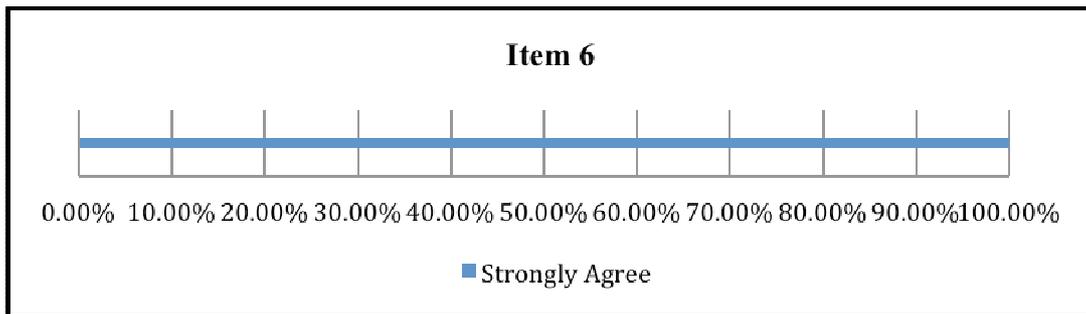


Figure 3. I would like to have additional practice using computer technology and developing digital tools for use with my students.

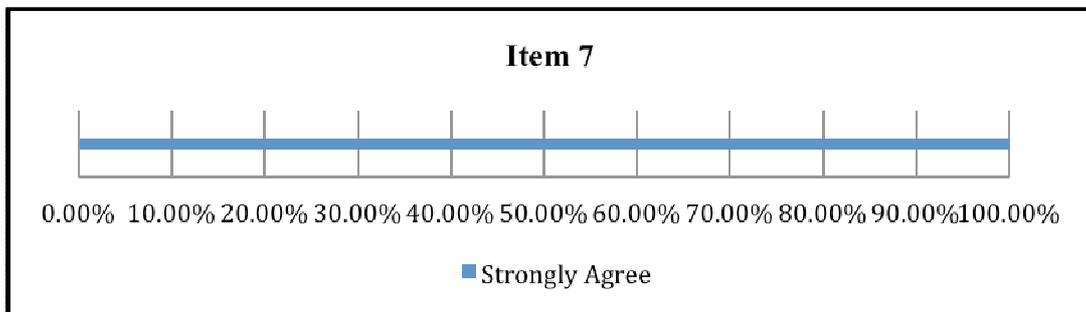


Figure 4. I would like to have my own computer to use in teaching.

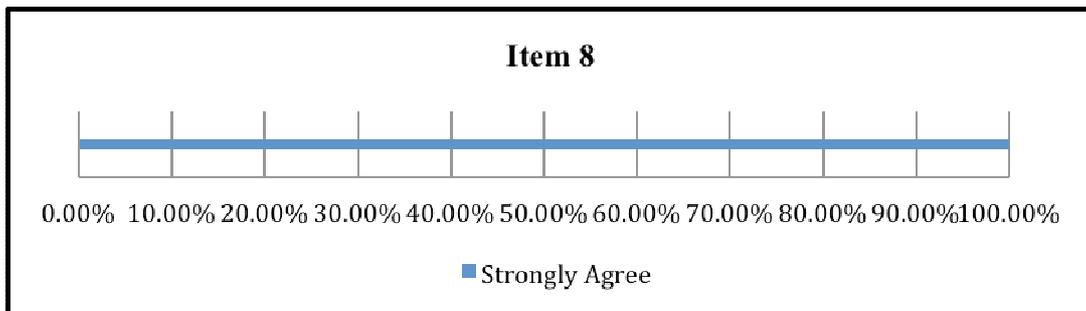


Figure 5. I would like to have additional tools like the ones we used during the workshop to use with my students.

These results clearly indicate that teachers who participated in the workshops then applied CALL and TBLL in their teaching found it increased their confidence and also resulted in improved motivation on the part of their students.

Results from the Post-Camp Student Survey also showed a very positive response from all 20 teen-aged campers sampled as indicated in Figures 6-8.

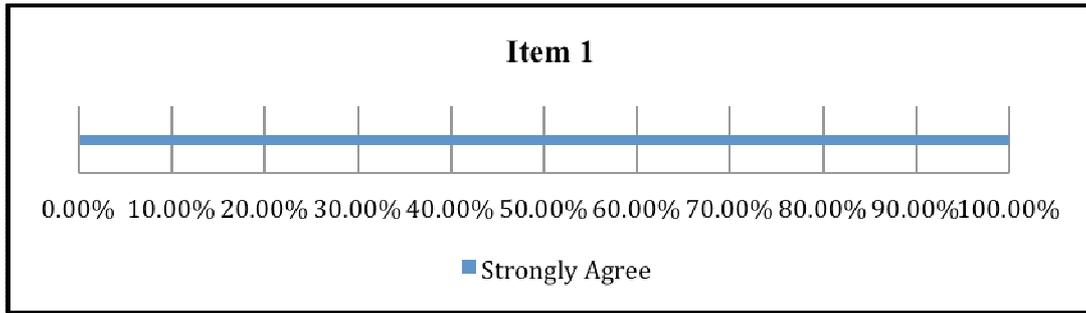


Figure 6. I feel my speaking and listening skills in English improved during camp.

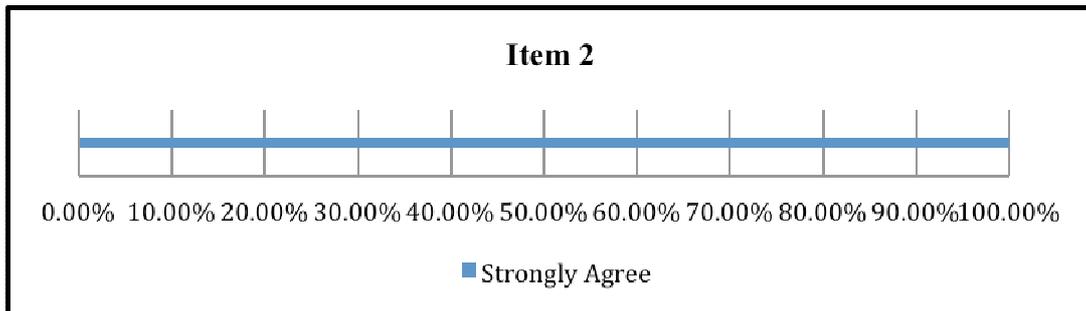


Figure 7. I enjoyed participating in the Bizworld/technology activities.

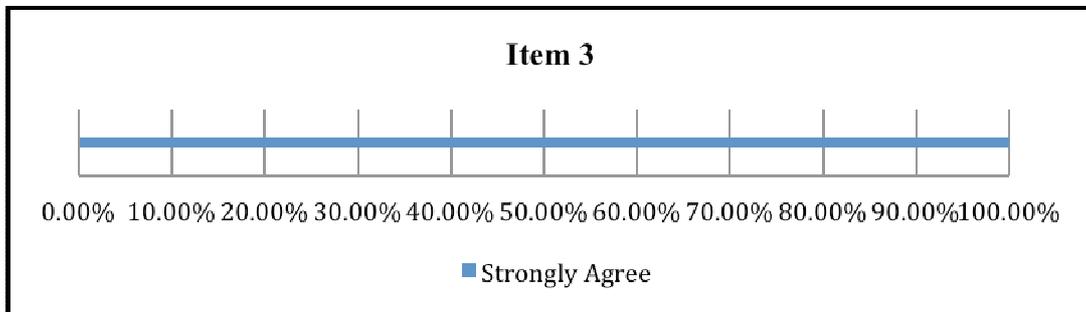


Figure 8. I would like to continue using a cell phone/iPad to help me learn spoken and written English.

These results clearly indicate that OVCs who participated in CALL and TBLL as part of the teen camp enjoyed the activities, believed their English proficiency improved as a result of their experiences and wished to continue using cell phones and iPads.

These results were mirrored in the responses provided by the 5 teachers in the Post-Camp Teacher Survey as shown in Figures 9-12.

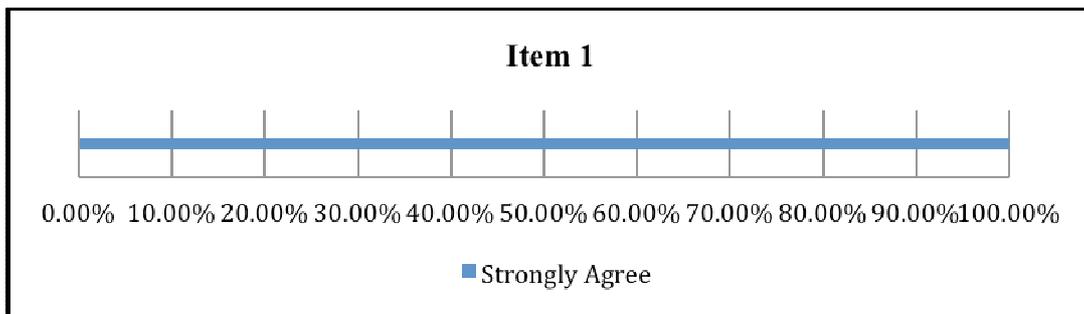


Figure 9. The campers' ability to use oral and written English improved as a result of participation in the Bizworld/technology activities.

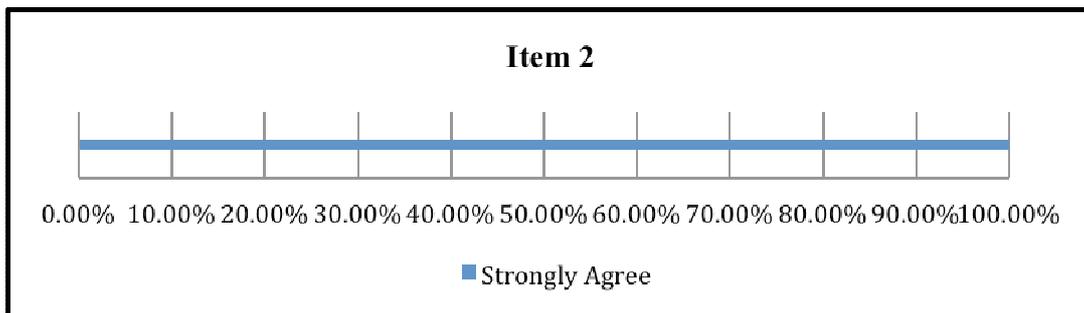


Figure 10. I enjoyed presenting the Bizworld/computer enhanced program to the campers.

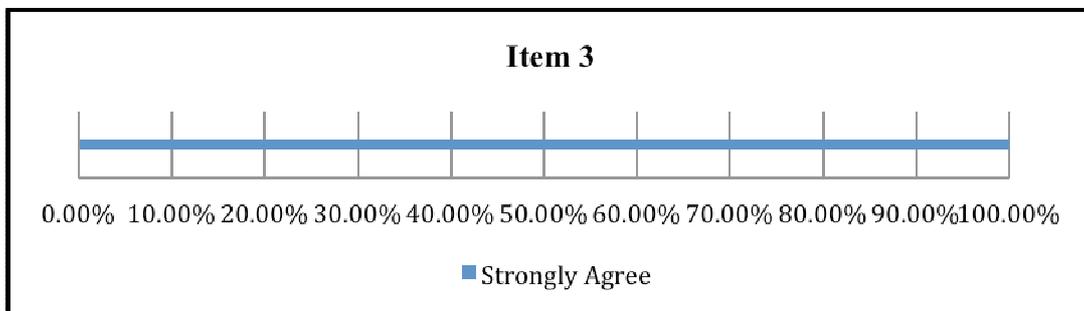


Figure 11. As a result of my experience this week, I feel more comfortable with using iPads in my teaching.

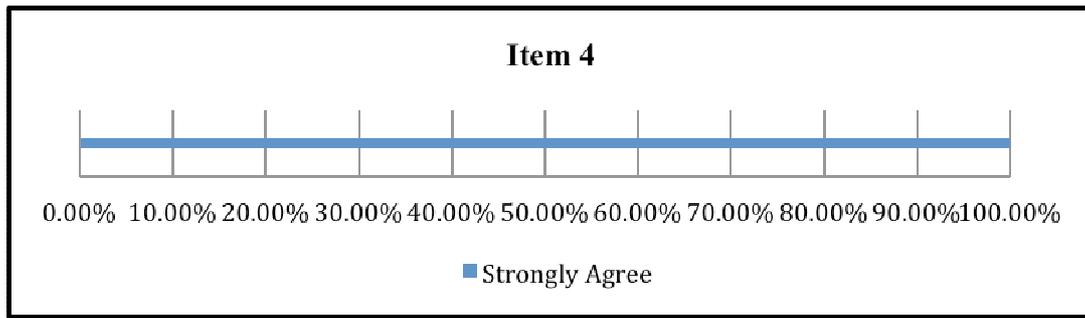


Figure 12. I would like to have iPads to use with my students.

Results demonstrate that the teachers who implemented CALL and TBLL activities as part of the teen camp enjoyed presenting the materials and believed the campers' English proficiency improved as a result of their work. They also expressed a desire to have an iPad of their own to use in their teaching of OVC.

Although these results may seem homogeneous, it is worth underlining that the CALL-TBLL experience was extremely innovative in this specific local context. Field observations confirmed, in fact, that use of CALL and TBLL was effective in improving motivation and achievement of teenaged English Language Learners. Throughout the camp, the students participated enthusiastically in all projects and activities. Moreover, the ads and videos they created along with their English presentations to the "board," demonstrated their newfound abilities to compose and convey powerful and persuasive oral messages.

It is important to point out that the work reported on is part of a small initiative that is still in progress and results are limited. However, since the project began, a higher percentage of students have passed English exams and progressed to the next grade. In January 2015, the *Bridge School* teacher, who participated in the 2011 workshops, traveled to the United States twice for more professional development, including the use of CALL and TBLL, and also taught during the teen camp, reported that all but one of her 15 students passed the end of year tests. In another case, an OVC who had started schooling only at the age of 13, claimed that the supplemental language lessons provided through use of his netbook, the classroom computer and specialized digital tools have also enabled him to pursue his education.

While we cannot be absolutely sure improved achievement in English Language Learning is due to the use of TBLL and CALL, the results are encouraging and indicate a need for further study.

5. Conclusions

Tentative results indicate that the use of computer technology has contributed to the professional development of Swazi teachers working at a mission school for OVC in a number of positive ways. Teachers indicated both through personal communications and their responses on surveys that learning to apply new strategies with the assistance of computer technology has resulted in increased confidence that they can meet the needs of learners, added to their enjoyment of teaching and contributed to a sense of empowerment. In addition, teachers expressed a strong desire to have more opportunities to practice new techniques as well as to obtain laptop and tablet computers of their own to use in their continued work with OVC.

It is clear that in the eyes of both teachers and students, using a combination of CALL and TBLL has a positive effect on English Language Learning for OVC at the school in Swaziland. Teacher respondents to the Post-Camp Questionnaire indicated they strongly agreed that students' English Language proficiency improved as a result of participation in CALL/TBLL activities included as part of the camp program. Student respondents strongly agreed that their use of oral and written English improved through camp experiences. They also expressed a strong desire to continue using mobile devices, including cell phone and tablet computers to assist with continued study of English.

Despite these promising findings, it is clear that there are a number of challenges and constraints to further implementation of CALL/TBLL at the school in Swaziland.

First, there are no funds available to support the use of instructional technology. Hardware and software are in short supply. Moreover, the current infrastructure does not support expanded use of CALL. Internet access is expensive and unreliable. The school also experiences frequent and long lasting power outages. Second, the use of CALL/TBLL, while strongly supported by teachers surveyed, is not common practice in traditional Swazi schools. Swazi teachers need continued opportunities for professional development and support from their partners in order for new pedagogies to flourish. Third, resources needed for full implementation of CALL/TBLL are not readily available in the Low Veld region of Swaziland. In order to sustain their new educational practices, teachers need a supply of books, both print and in digital form, personalized digital learning tools and up to date mobile-computing devices. It seems important to maintain the "Bridges to Swaziland," in order to support continued use of CALL/TBLL, thereby improving the lives of OVC through education.

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Appendix 1 – Post-Workshop, Teacher Feedback Questionnaire

Please respond to each question as completely as you can.

1. As a result of our workshops, what do you think about using computers to aid with ESL instruction?
2. What do you like best about using the digital tools?
3. What differences do you observe in your students as you teach using the methods learned through our workshops?

Please use this scale for your response to the next questions.

- 5 Strongly agree
- 4 Agree
- 3 Neither agree nor disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly disagree

4. *As a result of using the methods of teaching demonstrated, I feel more confident meeting the individual needs of my students.*
5. *When I use computer technology with my students, their motivation and achievement increase.*
6. *I would like to have additional practice using computer technology and developing digital tools for use with my students.*
7. *I would like to have my own computer to use in teaching.*
8. *I would like to have additional tools like the ones we used during the workshop to use with my students.*

Appendix 2 -Post-Camp Questionnaire for Students

Please use this scale for your response to each question.

- 5 Strongly agree
- 4 Agree
- 3 Neither agree nor disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly disagree

1. *I feel my speaking and listening skills in English improved during camp.*
2. *I enjoyed participating in the Bizworld/technology activities.*
3. *I would like to continue using a cell phone/iPad to help me learn spoken and written English.*

Appendix 3-Post-Camp Questionnaire for Teachers

Please use this scale for your response to each question.

- 5 Strongly agree
- 4 Agree
- 3 Neither agree nor disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly disagree

1. *The campers' ability to use oral and written English improved as a result of participation in the Bizworld/technology activities.*
2. *I enjoyed presenting the Bizworld/computer enhanced program to the campers.*
3. *As a result of my experience this week, I feel more comfortable with using iPads in my teaching.*
4. *I would like to have iPads to use with my students.*