

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background and purpose of this study, the research questions, as well as the significance and the limitations of the study. This chapter also includes the definition of the terms used in this study and a brief outline of each subsequent chapter.

1.2 Background of the Study

Education today has moved beyond the old 3R concept of reading, writing and arithmetic. We now live in the information and communications technology (ICT) age. Today, there is a fourth basic academic literacy – technology in electronic education (Chong, 2003). Students nowadays are exposed to a wide range of technology in the form of mobile phones, television, video, computers, the Internet and others. It follows then that they need to be equipped to function effectively in the present technologically advanced world.

A mismatch occurs when the exposure to technology in students' daily lives does not correspond with the school system. Problems arise when the education system responsible for educating these students is embedded in the past. A rigid education system which does not evolve with the times will surely lead to the estrangement and alienation of students from the very system which is supposed to educate them.

Recognizing the need for an education system which can cater to the technological needs of today's students, the Malaysian Government introduced Smart Schools in 1997. Smart Schools were adopted to support the Government's vision to obtain the status of a developed nation and become a regional and international technology and telecommunications hub by the year 2020. Ninety schools were selected for the pilot project and the Education Ministry projects that every school in Malaysia will be a "smart" learning environment by 2010. According to the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), these Smart Schools were intended to fill the following needs:

- a) To prepare school leavers for the Information Age.
- b) To bring about a systematic change in education, from an exam-dominated culture to a thinking and creative knowledge culture.
- c) To re-emphasise science and technology education with a focus on creativity and innovation.
- d) To equip students with information technology (IT) competence.
- e) To inculcate Malaysian values among the students and produce a generation of caring, peace-loving and environmentally concerned citizens.

Smart Schools aim to produce knowledge workers by adopting a curriculum which is self-accessed, self-paced and self-directed. Students will be able to access information from various sources anytime and anywhere. The Smart School curriculum also emphasises a practical approach which includes research, information gathering, design and production (CDC, 1997).

The Malaysian Government recognizes the importance of focusing on information and communications technology in order to boost the nation's competitiveness in the global arena. The Budget 2004 presented in September 2003 reflects the Government's commitment to turn the nation into a knowledge-based economy (Computimes, 2003). For example, to boost Internet use in the country, the Government has ensured lower access costs for corporate as well as home users. This should bode well for the increase in Internet literacy in Malaysia, especially for the younger generation who will be able to acquire information and current knowledge more readily. Apart from this, the Government has begun to implement a nationwide project called SchoolNet in order to increase wider Internet access in schools. A proposal has also been made to set up an information and communications technology (ICT) university in the country. The Government's initiatives are designed to harness the power of the Internet and this augurs well with our aspiration to become a developed country in the near future.

It is undeniable that the Internet has become an essential tool for teaching and learning. Students make use of the Internet for academic purposes such as doing research for projects and assignments and for personal purposes such as e-mailing and chatting. The Internet provides seemingly endless possibilities for helping teachers to successfully meet the challenge of engaging and sustaining the interest of their students (Lee, 2000).

Students are exposed to a wider range of English on the Internet than they would usually encounter in their daily lives. Muehleisen (1997) provides four reasons why the Internet should be incorporated into the teaching of English:

- a) **Learning to use computers provides a strong intrinsic motivation for learning English.** Students perceive the Internet as a new, exciting and fun way to learn English.
- b) **The Internet places English in an international context.** Students will find that they can and probably have to use English as a means of learning about and communicating with people around the world.
- c) **Internet projects are interactive.** Even when they are simply browsing, they are actually actively reading, evaluating and deciding what they will look at next.
- d) **Facilities for using the Internet are often readily available.** Most schools and institutions of higher learning in Malaysia now have computer laboratories equipped with Internet access for the students.

Although the Internet can be used as an excellent tool for language teaching and learning, its true potential may not be realised if students do not have a sufficient grasp of English – the lingua franca of the World Wide Web (WWW). Inadequate language proficiency can hamper successful interaction with the Internet. Browsing can be more frustrating than fun for students with limited

English proficiency. Such students may simply be overwhelmed when each click of a mouse brings them to another page with yet more links to click on.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Notwithstanding the existing body of articles and research in the area of language and information technology, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is a lack of research done in the area of information gathering via the Internet especially in terms of how English proficiency and other factors affect the process. This study, therefore, seeks to fill the gap in research in this area.

Since the researcher is a lecturer in Tunku Abdul Rahman (TAR) College in Kuala Lumpur, the college was chosen as the setting for this study. In 2001, TAR College began incorporating e-learning into the language courses. Today, students taking English courses in TAR College are required to access an online learning management system to supplement the traditional classroom teaching-learning system. The English language lecturers are responsible for the uploading, presentation and management of the content in the learning management system.

Apart from using the Internet to access the learning management system, the students are also required to browse the Internet for information to facilitate the completion of their assignments and projects. All TAR College students are given a minimum of 50 hours of Internet access per year and they may make use of the computers in the Communication and Information Technology Centre (CITC) or other terminals in various locations on campus.

According to Frankland (1999), students who lack adequate English skills will be severely handicapped in IT. As the majority of the students in TAR College are from Chinese-medium educational backgrounds, the researcher has found that many of them encounter difficulties understanding the predominantly English language content on the Internet. This study, therefore, set out to obtain data through qualitative and quantitative methods in order to discover whether English proficiency affected the performance of students when they gathered information via the Internet.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated as the premise of this study:

1. Do students of differing English proficiency levels perform differently in an Internet information gathering activity?
2. What are some of the possible factors that influenced their performance?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Given the focus and emphasis on tapping the resources available on the Internet, important lessons may be obtained from the outcome of this study. The findings of this study may help the researcher as well as other teachers to better understand how language proficiency as well as other factors affect information gathering via the Internet. Both teachers and learners will stand to gain when a better understanding of the Internet information gathering process leads to a more focused and practical teaching approach. An awareness of the needs and

difficulties faced by their students and will help teachers to be more prepared to take on the role of a facilitator to offer guidance and enhance learning.

Apart from benefiting teachers, the results of this study will also be of good use to the authorities, policy-makers and content developers to enable them to custom-design the language courses to suit the individual needs of the students and optimize the learning process.

This study is also significant in that it contributes to the existing body of research in the area of language and IT. It also provides a background for future researchers who may want to further explore the area of information gathering via the Internet.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

One of the most significant limitations of this study was the lack of specific previous research done in this area which could be referred to. As such, there was no standardized tool or reference point to serve as a guide for the researcher.

Apart from that, the data collected in this study were merely the observable data gathered by the researcher during her observations. The cognitive processes of the subjects could only be elicited to a limited degree via the retrospective interviews.

Also, due to constraints of time and space, this study was carried out on a small research population of 20 subjects. As such, the results obtained cannot be generalized or taken to represent the general population.

Apart from that, the subjects' language proficiency levels were gauged based on their SPM English examination results which were two years old at the time of the study. Therefore, their perceived English proficiency levels at the time of the study may not have represented their actual English proficiency levels.

Another limiting factor faced by the researcher in this study was that there was not a very obvious disparity between the two groups in terms of English proficiency levels. The original intention to have two widely contrasting groups – one group with A1 for SPM English and the other with P7 – was constrained by the sample.

Finally, this is essentially a qualitative study in which the possible factors affecting Internet information gathering were identified. However, the extent to which these factors affect the process could not be determined within the scope of this study. Therefore, more quantitative research needs to be carried out to ascertain the relationship between the variables as well as the extent to which each factor affects information gathering via the Internet.

1.7 Definition of Terms

The following is a list of terms used in this study and their definitions (adapted from <http://www.matisse.net> and <http://www.netlingo.com>):

Access

To log on to the Internet, where you can browse information, view web sites, retrieve data, and send or receive e-mail. The term "access" comes from the notion that you are accessing a computer system, known as a server, that enables you to connect to other computers and "get online." Access can also be used to describe the act of retrieving information.

Browse

The process of moving through a web site or "surfing the Net," using a World Wide Web browser and clicking on a variety of hyperlinks. Derived from the notion of "browsing" through a store, the term implies you are "just looking," but in fact, you are interacting because you must point-and-click to get to the next web page.

Browser (or Web Browser)

A programme used to view, download, upload, browse, or otherwise access documents (for example, web pages) on the Internet. Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer are well-known web browsers that enable you to view and interact with web sites.

Chat or Chatting

A form of interactive online communication that enables users to have real-time conversations with other people who are also online. When participating in a chat discussion, your messages are instantaneously relayed to other people and their messages are instantaneously relayed to you, no matter where in the world you or the other people happen to be.

Click

The sound your mouse makes when you press down its button, a click is also the action of pressing and releasing the mouse button, usually to select or activate something.

Cyberspace

This term is currently used to describe the whole range of information resources available through computer networks.

Download

Transferring data (usually a file) from another computer to the computer you are using.

E-mail (Electronic Mail)

Messages, usually text, sent from one person to another via computer.

Homepage (or Home page)

This refers to the main web page for a business, organisation or person. It is the first page or front page of a web site. It serves as the starting point for navigation.

HTML (Hypertext Markup Language)

The coding language used to create hypertext documents for use on the World Wide Web. The "hyper" in hypertext comes from the fact that in HTML you can specify that a block of text, or an image, is linked to another file on the Internet. HTML files are meant to be viewed using a web browser.

Hyperlink (or Link)

The text or graphics on a web site that can be clicked on with a mouse to take you to another web page or a different area of the same web page. Hyperlinks are usually created (or coded) in HTML. They are also used to load multimedia files, such as movie and sound files.

Hypertext

Generally, any text that contains links to other documents - words or phrases in the document that can be chosen by a reader and which cause another document to be retrieved and displayed. The term was coined by Ted Nelson to refer to a non-linear system of information browsing and retrieval based on associative links between documents.

Menu

A list of items you can select. For example, it usually appears on your computer screen as a list of command choices (such as "open" or "save" or "exit"). This term also loosely refers to any type of dialogue box, check box, or list of option buttons that appear on a web site.

Navigate

The act of moving around the Web by clicking on hypertext links (or paths) that take you from one web page to another.

Search Engine

A web-based system for searching for the information available on the Web.

URL (Uniform Resource Locator)

An address for a resource available on the Internet.

Web page

A document designed for viewing in a web browser. Web pages are typically written in HTML.

World Wide Web(WWW)

World Wide Web (or simply Web for short) is a term frequently used when referring to the Internet.

1.8 Chapter Outline

Chapter Two is a review of literature related to this study. The chapter outlines the history of the Internet, establishes the importance of English in the Internet and looks at the various factors that come into play when students gather information via the Internet.

Chapter Three covers the research methodology used in this study, describes in detail the subjects of the study and presents the steps taken to analyse the data.

Chapter Four contains the presentation of the findings of the study and the discussion according to each research question.

Chapter Five is a summary of the study that was carried out. Also in this chapter are the conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for future research.