CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Over the past 15 years, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been extensively used in higher education, covering a wide variety of disciplines which include language learning (Murray, 1995; Baron, 1998; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001) and business communications (Connell & Gailbraith, 1982; Compton et al., 1986; Hardy, 1992). The term CMC has come to denote both synchronous and asynchronous activities such as e-mail, internet access, computer conferencing and electronic bulletin boards as well as applications of word processed electronic documents (see 1.5.4, 1.5.10 and 1.5.11, pp. 13-14).

Of all the different types of CMCs, e-mail has proven to be the most popular and the most widely used Internet application (McElhearn, 1996; Warschauer, 1995). As a matter of fact, extensive use of e-mail, particularly in the world of business, has been anticipated to have the potential to revolutionize business communications (Connell and Gailbraith, 1982). These past and currently on-going stages of development have greatly affected what goes on in a Business English class because Business English, like any other types of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), is primarily concerned with not only how language is used in real communication (Widdowson, 1981) but also the
underlying thinking process, the learner’s needs and the learning process that takes place (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Therefore, it is imperative that ESP practitioners and course designers be open-minded and more positive towards adopting more effective techniques to be incorporated into the ESP classroom.

1.1 Background to the study

Institut Teknologi Darulnaim (ITD), where this research was conducted, is a private college situated in the suburban area of Kota Bharu, Kelantan. The college began its operation in July 1997, and one of the reasons that led to the establishment of the college, was to provide more educational opportunities for local as well as international students especially from neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia and Singapore. This is in line with the aim of the state government to turn Kelantan into a centre for education that it used to be.

To date, ITD has been offering courses ranging from Management Technology to Engineering. These courses are franchised post secondary diploma programmes, of which Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) is the franchisor. At present, there are nearly 15,000 students who are registered as franchised diploma students in various courses at almost 40 UTM Franchise Colleges all over Malaysia. At the time this study was conducted, there were 665 registered students at ITD, inclusive of the first
group of thirteen UK-based Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Higher National Diploma (HND) in Business students.

Whilst the number of students per intake at ITD seems to increase proportionately, there is a growing concern for the considerably high rates of both failures, or Kedudukan Gagal (KG) and conditional status, Kedudukan Bersyarat (KS), which had increased from 10% and 16% in July 1999/2000 to 12% and 20% in December 2000/2001 respectively, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Overall results (July 1999/2000 – December 2000/2001) Institut Teknologi Darulnaim

Source: Academic Affairs Department, ITD (2001)
Even though the increase was less than 5%, this percentage represented an average of more than 50 students in each semester, which meant a loss of almost RM 250,000 of income in the form of student fees. For a private college like ITD, RM 0.25 million is a substantially huge amount of annual revenue. Therefore, it is imperative that something must be done to channel these students to another type of programme of study.

In attempting to help these students, as well as to offer an alternative to students who seem to lack focus in academic-based learning, to pursue a vocational-based qualification, ITD has teamed up with Bradford College, an associate college of the University of Bradford, UK, to offer the Edexcel BTEC Higher National Diploma (HND), commencing July 2001. The specialisations or pathways to be offered are Business and Business & Computing. Prior to this, an application to become a BTEC HND Centre was sent to the awarding body, Edexcel Foundation, UK, a merger between BTEC, which focuses on vocational qualifications and the academic-based University of London Examinations and Assessment Council (ULEAC, or London Examinations), which handles the GCE ‘O’ Level, GCSE, ‘A’ Level and the London Test of English, formerly known as Certificate of Attainment in English. At the time this study was conducted, ITD had been successfully validated and approved as an Edexcel Centre (No. 75940) before the intake of the first batch of BTEC HND (Business) students for July 2001/2002 session.
To ensure smooth running of the programme in compliance with Edexcel’s high standard and strict regulations, ITD had also appointed Bradford College to be its *Quality Partner (QP)*. To date, Bradford College is the largest college in the UK with some 35,000 students. Under the *QP* arrangement, Bradford College had helped ITD develop a one-year/two-semester foundation programme to be incorporated into the BTEC HND (Business), making it a three-year or six-semester course. This was deemed necessary mainly for two reasons:

(a) to provide a strong basis for fresh post secondary SPM students to study a vocational-based English medium Business course

(b) to comply with certain additional requirements for the purpose of gaining local accreditation status from the National Board of Accreditation or *Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN)*

Whilst students’ preferred choice would perhaps be BTEC HND in terms of not having to take irrelevant subjects during the course of their studies like in the academic-based, Malay-medium UTM Diploma programmes, the medium of instruction in BTEC HND programmes, which is English, needs to be given serious thought. Almost 90% of the subjects or *units*, as they are called in BTEC HND programmes, would have to be taught in English, as shown in Table 1:

> 5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO</th>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>UNIT TITLE</th>
<th>CR.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Semester 1 YEAR ONE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FBN 1104</td>
<td>Foundations of Business Numeracy &amp; Financial</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Performance</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>FCS 1103</td>
<td>Computer Skills Workshop</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>FIE 1114</td>
<td>Intensive Business English (Level I)</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>FSS 1103</td>
<td>Assessment Skills Workshop</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>LAN 1004/5</td>
<td>Pengajian Islam/Pendidikan Moral</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td><strong>Semester 2 YEAR ONE</strong></td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>FBC 1203</td>
<td>Business Communication</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>FBF 1204</td>
<td>Foundations of Business Finance and Costs</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>FIE 1224</td>
<td>Intensive Business English (Level II)</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>LAN 1001/2</td>
<td>Bahasa Kebangsaan A/Bahasa Kebangsaan B</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>LAN 1003</td>
<td>Pengajian Malaysia</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Semester 3 YEAR TWO</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>21451P</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>21452P</td>
<td>Managing Financial Resources</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>20754P</td>
<td>Marketing Intelligence</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>20750P</td>
<td>Management Accounting</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td><strong>Semester 4 YEAR TWO</strong></td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>22035P</td>
<td>Organisations and Behaviour</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>22036P</td>
<td>Organisations, Competition and Environment</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>20752P</td>
<td>Financial Reporting</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>20755P</td>
<td>Advertising and Promotion</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td><strong>Semester 5 YEAR THREE</strong></td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>20746P</td>
<td>Quantitative Techniques for Business</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>20747P</td>
<td>Legal and Regulatory Framework</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>20756P</td>
<td>Marketing Planning</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>9887W</td>
<td>Managing Information</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Semester 6 YEAR THREE</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>20748P</td>
<td>Management Information Systems</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>20749P</td>
<td>Business Strategy</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>20757P</td>
<td>Sales Planning and Operations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>20761P</td>
<td>Employee Relations</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>TOTAL CREDIT HOURS</strong></td>
<td><strong>98</strong></td>
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Source: Academic Affairs Department, ITD (2001)
The only units delivered in Bahasa Malaysia are the compulsory units required by the National Board of Accreditation, or LAN (Lembaga Akreditasi Negara). Entry requirements strictly stipulate that students must have at least obtained a pass in English Language at SPM level and Level 4 of the London Test of English (formerly known as Certificate of Attainment in English) or equivalent before they begin their second year of the three-year programme. Alternatively, if that is somehow not possible, they must pass Level 4 of the London Test of English before they complete the final year. Although this appeared to be sufficient for Edexcel, ITD Board of Directors, strongly felt that students would have to take a specially-developed intensive Business English course during their first year of study, to facilitate their learning needs throughout the whole course of their studies. Hence, both Intensive Business English Level I (FIE 1114) and Intensive Business English Level II (FIE 1224) were included as compulsory subjects or units in the first two semesters of the three-year programme respectively.

Having to deal with eight hours of intensive Business English lessons per week is not easy, even for an average or above average student. Hence, it is necessary for the instructor to find practical and innovative ideas on how to make the students’ learning as interesting as possible, in order to improve their communicative abilities, which are going to be very crucial throughout the course of their studies as well as at the workplace later after successful completion of the programme. In an attempt to make
language learning an interesting experience for these students, the
traditional 'chalk and talk' method has to make way for the more
contemporary alternative of making use of modern educational tools.
Hence, the use of computer-mediated communications (CMC) is not only
necessary but becomes absolutely essential.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

A pass in English Language at SPM level is indeed insufficient to ensure
that students are able to get along smoothly in an English medium tertiary
level programme, let alone to prepare them for an English-speaking
working environment later in today's global business which is
knowledge-based and depends heavily upon information and
communications technology (ICT). Thus, communicative abilities
become very essential in business, and they include the ability to
communicate effectively in internal and external business
correspondence. Hence, in most Business English syllabuses, a great deal
of emphasis is placed upon both internal and external business
correspondence such as the memorandum (memo) and letters. However,
this is where students fail to excel.

Prior to this research, a preliminary study was conducted by the
researcher and fellow colleagues at ITD on the third semester
Management Technology (DDG) students in the Malay-medium UTM
Diploma Programme who were taught conventional business
correspondence at Level 3-DDH 2112 (Intermediate) of the compulsory English Language course and subsequently, again at Level 4-DDH 2212 (Upper Intermediate). An analysis was done and the results showed that students had frequently lost marks on the memo format and spelling errors. As a matter of fact, other lecturers who were teaching students from another business-related course, Accounting (DDW), had also analysed their students’ work and found that they also seemed to lose marks easily on format and spelling errors. In both cases, it was observed that this was the case in both internal and external business correspondence. This occurred despite the fact that some of the students did obtain a strong credit for English Language at SPM level, which clearly depicts the current state of proficiency here among ITD students and in the state of Kelantan.

Another major findings of the preliminary study is that it was also observed that although there were frequent occurrences of spelling errors in both memo-writing and letter-writing, students seemed to lose more marks on the memo format rather than on the business letter format. Since the BTEC HND (Business) students’ English Language grades at SPM level are similar to those of their peers in the UTM DDG and DDW courses, it is predicted that similar occurrence is most likely to be observed in this intensive Business English course specially developed for the English-medium BTEC HND (Business) students. Therefore, it is proposed that, given adequate time and opportunity to learn and
understand the principles of business communications, with the right kind of educational tools such as e-mail, particularly with regard to memo-writing, students could be gradually trained on how to take full advantage of these educational tools in order to improve their communicative abilities.

1.3 Purpose of the study

According to Frizler (1995), research in CMC has indicated that technology can give students a sense of empowerment and develop their ‘communicative abilities’ and one of the most widely used forms of CMC in language teaching is electronic mail (e-mail). Although the use of e-mail in language teaching has increased (Murray, 1995; Baron, 1998; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001), many language instructors still rely on conventional method of teaching. Hence, unlike in the existing Malay-medium UTM Diploma programme where business correspondence is taught using conventional method, this newly-developed intensive Business English course incorporates the use of e-mail in memo-writing with the aim of helping BTEC HND (Business) students to become familiar with CMC and use readily available tools to produce memos that have the acceptable standard format with minimal spelling errors.
The aim of this study is to find out whether the use of e-mail has any effect on the students' memo-writing skills, with regard to the memo format and spelling errors. In addition, an attempt is also made to find out whether the use of e-mail has any effect on students' interest in learning memo-writing. Finally, this case study also views the benefits and limitations of using e-mail in memo-writing amongst vocational-based BTEC HND (Business) students, to whom English is their second language, from the perspectives of the students as well as those of the instructor.

1.4 Research Questions

This case study attempts to answer the following questions:

(a) Does the use of e-mail have any effect on the students' memo-writing skills with regard to the memo format?

(b) Does the use of e-mail have any effect on the students' memo-writing skills with regard to the number of occurrences of spelling errors produced by the students?

(c) Does the use of e-mail have any effect on students' interest in learning memo-writing?

(d) What are the benefits and limitations of using e-mail in memo-writing?
1.5 Definitions of key terms

1.5.1 ESP

ESP or English for Specific or Special Purposes, is, “not a particular kind of language or methodology ... [but] ... an approach to language learning, which is based on learner needs” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987:19).

1.5.2 Business English

Business English is the kind of English “used for business purposes in international and inter-cultural contexts as a common means of communication by the people who do not share a first language” (Someya, 1999: 5). It is also termed as English for Business Purposes (EBP) and is a branch of ESP.

1.5.3 Memorandum (memo)

The memorandum or simply ‘memo’ is “a written communication from one person to another (or to a group of people) within the same organisation” (Taylor, 1999: 63). It can be a short “one page...” or a long “four-page document, usually single-spaced ...” (Huckin & Olsen, 1991: 249) if it is written as a short report.

1.5.4 Computer-mediated communication (CMC)

Webopedia, an online dictionary of computer and technology terms, defines CMC as:
Human communication via computers and includes many different forms of synchronous, asynchronous or real time interaction that humans have with each other using computers as tools to exchange text, images, audio and video [such as] e-mail, network communication, instant messaging, hypertext, distance learning, Internet forums, USENET, newsgroup, bulletin boards, online shopping, distribution list and videoconferencing.

Webopedia,
http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/C/CMC.html
[30 January 2003]

1.5.5 Conventional memo

The term conventional memo refers to a memo that is handwritten or typed and sent manually by the writer to its reader.

1.5.6 Electronic memo (e-memo)

The term electronic memo meanwhile refers to a memo that is sent via internet or intranet using the electronic mail (e-mail). The memo can either be in the form of an e-mail itself or in the form of other types of electronic documents such as Microsoft Word or Adobe Acrobat PDF.

1.5.7 Electronic mail (e-mail)

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, electronic mail (e-mail) stands for “the system of sending text, pictures, etc. to other people by means of computers linked to a
network" or, it can also be "information [itself] sent by this method" (1996, p. 373).

1.5.8 Plain text e-mail

A plain text e-mail is an e-mail which is readable by text editors and word processors. This type of e-mail uses normal text that has not been encrypted and is not able to display complicated characters and audio or visual files.

1.5.9 HTML e-mail

HTML stands for 'hypertext mark-up language'. E-mail messages that have been formatted as HTML documents allow more attractive fonts in various sizes and pictures to be displayed properly. Files can also be sent as attachments.

1.5.10 Synchronous

Refers to any form of communication that is synchronised or co-ordinated in time, that is, the initial action is completed first before the next one begins.

1.5.11 Asynchronous

Refers to any form of communication that is not synchronised or not co-ordinated in time, that is, the next action may begin even before the initial action is completed.
1.5.12 Spellchecker

A separate programme or an embedded function in word processor or e-mail system that compares the spelling of a word, a marked block of words, an entire document or a group of documents to the one stored in the programme and detects misspelled words but not the wrong use of correctly spelt words.

1.5.13 Format

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines format as "shape and size" (1996, p.464). Thus, in memo-writing, format refers to the spatial or visual arrangement of the parts of the memo, which normally includes headings, margins, spacing, indentations, fonts, graphic or pictorial information and closing.

1.5.14 Spelling errors

According to Richards, Platt & Platt, error refers to "the use of a linguistic item in writing in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning." Errors should be differentiated from mistakes, which are "caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness or some other aspects of performance" (1996, p. 127).
1.6 Limitations of the study

This study was conducted at Institut Teknologi Darulnaim (ITD), in the east coast region of Peninsular Malaysia where English is not widely spoken. The sample in this case study was also a small number of the pioneer group of BTEC HND (Business) students. Thus, conclusions drawn from this case study would only be applicable to the population of the college and some considerations would have to be made before this study could be extended to other similar populations. In addition, as Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2001) point out in their study, it is difficult to make generalisations because of the small size of the sample.

The focus of this study was also limited to memo-writing in Business English and did not apply to other forms of internal or external business correspondence, such as notices and letters. In addition, only two aspects of memo-writing were studied, namely the memo format and the number of occurrences of spelling errors that the students produced. However, this does not mean that the students did not have problems in other aspects, particularly grammar. The two aspects were studied because they had been identified as the two most common factors that led to students losing marks too easily in memo-writing.

The present study was also concerned with the use of e-mail to send and receive electronic memos and the effects it had on students' memo-writing skills. Therefore, it did not apply to other forms of CMC.
Finally, this case study also sought to find out whether the use of e-mail had any effects on the students' interest in learning memo-writing in FIE 1114. Thus, it did not attempt to find out whether the use of e-mail had any effects on the students' interest in learning other topics in FIE 1114 nor did it try to determine whether students became more interested in learning FIE 1114 as a whole, compared to other subjects or units in their first semester of the BTEC HND (Business) programme.

1.7 Significance of the study

CMC such as e-mail has become essential in business communications. E-mail is an example of CMC that could possibly serve as an important tool for both teachers and students, especially in business-related tertiary level courses in the new millennium, which are certainly going to be knowledge-based and ICT-driven. It can also provide an excellent opportunity for teachers to motivate their students to learn English since almost 85% of information that appears on the Net is in English (Frizler, 1995). This online information could easily be accessed and sent or forwarded via e-mail to students who could later send or forward the received information to peers and give feedback to the teacher. Hence, the findings of this study could be of some use to teachers or instructors who are searching for ways on how to incorporate the use of e-mail into their syllabuses, although adaptations in certain areas might be necessary.
Another significance of this study is that apart from finding answers to the research questions, it also fulfilled the need for more research to be carried out in the context of Malaysian Business English in a UK-based tertiary level education. This is significantly important because research in locally-based ESP is still lacking (Leong, 2001).

In a vocational-based programme such as BTEC HND (Business), students need to be given practical assignments that are similar to what they would expect at the workplace. Currently, the use of e-mail, internet, intranet and computer is considered a necessity in the business world. With that in mind, policy makers, who are involved in BTEC HND (Business) curriculum design, could make use of the findings in this study to view the possibility of formally integrating CMC into the teaching of business correspondence in the BTEC HND (Business) programme. If such a move could be made possible, it would be more advantageous to the BTEC HND (Business) students as prospective employees at the workplace later.