

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO STUDY

1.1 GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES IN RELATION TO TECHNOLOGY.

The world can be seen as undergoing waves of change. The first wave was the Agricultural revolution, the second wave, the Industrial Revolution and the third wave is the high speed Electronic revolution that is striking us now. According to Toffler:

What the Third Wave is doing, therefore, is not creating some ideal superhuman, some new heroic species stalking through our midst, but producing dramatic changes in the traits distributed through society - not a new man but a new social structure (Toffler, 1981:391).

This electronic age has created an implosion bringing the world together in a global village - a borderless world. This implosion can be likened to a certain extent to the invention of the printing press and the beginning of Renaissance. As a result, it is forcing us to reconsider and re evaluate practically every thought, action and institution formally taken for granted.

It is so pervasive that it leaves no part of us untouched, unaffected, or unaltered. To this end the new age of technology is

already well launched, fuelled by a long stream of techno- driven goods and services that is flooding the consumer marketplace to change the ways people work and live. The heart of this cyber revolution is of course the personal computer.

In the business world, post modern technology is now a market phenomenon and has caused what can be called an inflection point or paradigm shift. The gradual move away from big machines towards work stations and personal computers has been going on for years in corporate America but the inflection point has come now all over the world - suddenly. Whatever else happens, there will be no let-up in technology's march into the marketplace. Judging from the information in newspapers, business magazines and technology magazines, the information highway with its load of related technologies, has not only attracted the most attention, but also the biggest investment in the business world. For example, in the public sector in Malaysia in 1993, the amount of money allocated for technology is about five times more than the amount ever spent in previous years or in the history of the organisations' existence because of the realisation that to be competitive and efficient in today's world, one needs to incorporate technology into the organisation's structure. Some of the departments in Malaysia and the amount of money spent on computer systems are as follows:

Inland Revenue Department	RM 142.20 million
Veterinary Services Department	RM 6.74 million
University Utara Malaysia	RM 6.74 million
Valuation and Property Services Department	RM 6.35 million
Ministry of Education	RM 5.55 million

(Mampu, in Computimes, February 1994).

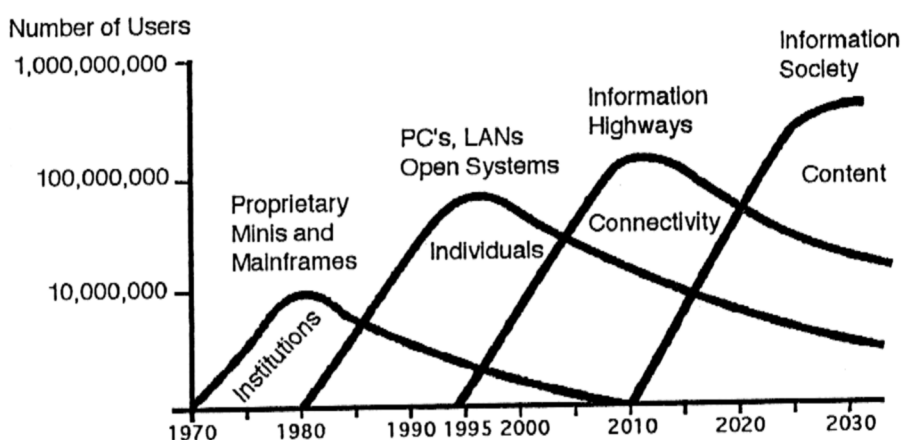
Many business organisations are spending vast sums of money on technology. There are many reasons for this expenditure, one of which is that geographical boundaries are now no longer constraints. For example, a company in America can have its plant in Malaysia to take advantage of the relatively cheap labour, and, probably, availability of raw materials, but still run the company from America via its communication network. In this respect, the information technology's greatest appeal is E- mail. E - mail and the bulletin boards together function like electronic coffee houses where people from different countries and various businesses can gather in these cyberspace salons, defying geography in virtual communities and talk business. This network has already gone mainstream.

There is already another paradigm shift in the industry. The Information highway can be seen as the next great wave of industry expansion where the defining aspect will be connectivity, as seen in the explosion in connections to the Internet - the first major manifestation of this trend toward universal interconnection. This idea of connectivity and computers being part of our everyday life is also predicted in computer magazines:

As we race headlong in the twenty first century, the term "convergence" will become increasingly common. The term basically refers to the way digital technology is changing our lives by weaving computing and telecommunications even more tightly into the fabric of our everyday lives(Computimes, May 1995).

It is also predicted that this evolution will go on to create an information society which will be defined by the arrival of truly all - digital multimedia content. (The Gray Sheet- Computer Industry Report, 1994). These trends are clearly indicated in the graph below. (Refer to Figure 1A).

Figure 1A
IT Industry Evolution Trends 1970 - 2030



(The Gray Sheet, October, 1994).

The first stage of the evolution centred around proprietary minicomputers and main frames which focussed on institutions, and involved a limited number of information workers - around ten million worldwide. It peaked in the early 1980's and has since dwindled to a gradual decline. The connectivity paradigm of the first stage will probably dwindle further in about a decade.

We are now at the apex of the second stage of the evolution which, centres on individuals, nearly 100 million of them, whether in

the workplace, especially white-collar and professional activities, or in schools, or increasingly, in the home. The technological centre has been the personal computer either as a stand alone or in a local area network.

This has helped to shift the economic centre of the industry from the hardware manufacturer to the software purchaser. The advances in technology have once again transcended the paradigm of localistic networks connecting limited number of professionals. Soon everyone will be wired as evidenced in the amount of users in the Internet.

The third wave of industry expansion is the information highway where the defining aspect is the connectivity of both business and consumers. The evolution is not predicted to cease at this stage but will be realised in the formation of the information society. The information society will be defined by the arrival of the truly all-digital multimedia content. In a true information society, connectivity will be transparent, a given, and user emphasis will shift to content and applications.

1.2 MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE IN RELATION TO TECHNOLOGY

While there are many important technological inventions, innovations and implementations in the business organisations in North America and Europe, it is also important to acknowledge that the growth centre of the world economy is now in the Asia Pacific region and not in Europe and America. The arena of business action

has now shifted to the Asia Pacific region. In Malaysia, for example, economic growth and industrialisation, coupled with the impact of technology, has generated an incredible amount of business for Malaysian exporters and investors. Also present in the Malaysian business environment is increasing competition, which is becoming more aggressive.

In addition, there are diminishing rules, regulations, and tariffs, because Malaysian companies have to compete on a global scale, and there are increasing labour costs which must be counter-balanced with higher productivity, and finally, efficient organisations to ensure products and services remain competitive. Malaysia's weak point at this stage in its development is technology and this weakness needs to be addressed if Malaysia wants to compete with the industrialised countries of the North. Knowledge of this weakness and the need to address it has been voiced in popular business magazines in the country. For example, it was reported in Malaysian Industry that:

The 1985 Industrial Master plan has underlined the urgent need for mastery of industrial technology as well as for developing indigenous technological capability and competitiveness. These technological deficiencies happen to be Malaysia's weak points (Malaysian Industry, 1995:42).

Furthermore, according to the dialogue between the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and the private sector, two issues stand out as being crucial to Malaysia's sustainable competitiveness: (i) the development of local human resources and (ii) indigenous technological capabilities. This is in keeping with the Government's aim to elevate Malaysia's position from being the nineteenth to the

fifteenth largest trading nation in the world by the year 2020.

(Malaysian Industry, April 1995).

The government's role in evolving Malaysia into an information rich society and electronic data interchange is seen in the enforcement of mandatory submission of the import declaration form identified as (K1) to the Customs and Excise Department via electronic data interchange (EDI). As reported in the magazine Computerworld, this is effective in January 1996. (Computerworld, April 1995).

This move clearly indicates the inevitable - that electronic commerce will replace the traditional way of conducting business whether by choice or circumstance, thus making the move to a paperless society more imminent. EDI Malaysia has the endorsement of the Malaysian government as the VAN (value added network) provider responsible for moving the country into the era of electronic commerce. That this will be the trend of the business of the future is predicted by Computimes:

The nineties represents one of the most dynamic telecommunications scenarios to occur either in the Asian or Asia-Pacific region. (Computimes, May 15th. 1995).

As reported in the same magazine, Malaysia's total planned expenditure in the telecommunications industry, for example for the next five years is expected to be over RM \$ 40 billion. The amount is ranked third in terms of capital investment for the telecommunications industry among the countries in Asia, with China in the lead with a planned expenditure of US \$ 120 billion and Japan second with US \$ 112.5 billion.

Given these developments and new directions, one cannot help but be concerned about these critical issues in terms of human resource development (henceforth HRD) in the Asia Pacific region, and Malaysia in particular. In order to begin to cater to these new needs in HRD, one needs to know what business conventions are in vogue, how technology is used in the workplace, and how current communication forms are different from those found in the standard "Business English" textbooks of North America and Europe. Many HRD facilitators in the business sector in Malaysia still use these textbooks to train members of the Asian business community despite the changes occurring in the industry. However, critical issues pertaining to Asia Pacific business are neglected, or inadequately treated, in existing American and European teaching materials. With the new economic and social developments in the Asia Pacific region, one needs to know what aspects of business training are needed, as it has important implications for HRD. Research findings derived from experience and observation, based on the issues and problems of the region, therefore become relevant and pertinent for the training of professionals and the future workforce of the country.)

Since the impact of technology in the business world has been phenomenal, educators need to teach the business community the ways in which they can best capitalise on the potential of technology for communication. One way could be by documenting and observing the ways successful business organisations use technology towards the furtherance of their communicative and business goals. Such information can then be passed to the new workforce through HRD programs.

There is therefore a great need to document the ways in which successful business practice is carried out in Malaysia in relation to technology and human resource in the workplace. Such work would prepare corporations to become “adaptive corporations” (Toffler 1985) because the corporate environment has grown increasingly unstable, accelerative, and revolutionary. Under such conditions, all organisations become extremely vulnerable to outside forces or pressures. Managers must learn to cope in situations in which small inputs can trigger vast results and vice versa. As Toffler says:

The adaptive corporation', therefore, needs a new kind of leadership. It needs 'managers of adaptation' equipped with a whole set of new, non-linear skills (Toffler, 1985:2).

Malaysia is undergoing an economic transformation and is fast entering an era of rapid industrialisation. The principal thrust of development is the promotion of a more balanced, broad-based, resilient and internationally competitive economy so as to provide the foundation for attaining the status of a fully developed nation by the year 2020. This vision of the Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir, of making Malaysia a developed country is now popularly known as Vision 2020. The challenges facing the country in achieving this dream are best summed up in the Prime Minister's speech pertaining to the manufacturing sector.

The Government will devise appropriate assistance schemes and will seek to raise the level of management expertise, technological know how and the skills of the employees in this very important and in many ways neglected sector of our economy.
(Malaysia: The Way Forward 1991:19).

This rapid development of information technology, the widespread use of electronic media and the current interest in the development of knowledge and service industries have brought about a new need; competence in English, the international language of trade and commerce and the wherewithal of technology. the system that supports this communication. Given these changes in the social and economic environment, many Malaysians are now feeling the pressure of being forced to communicate effectively in their second language in the business sector. Coming from a Malay medium of instruction, many new members of the industry are at a disadvantage, not only because of a lack of general proficiency in this language, but more importantly, because of ignorance of the variety of English used in business discourse and in technology.

This situation is further compounded by Malaysia moving from an agriculture based, to manufacture based industries. This change in focus has brought about a need to compete and communicate with the rest of the world especially with the developed countries who have been the leaders in producing manufactured goods. This concurs with Green's (1993) argument that:

English language and literacy courses stand as the significant gatekeepers for regulation, membership and access to dominant discourses and traditions, relations of knowledge, power and authority (Green, 1993: 4).

Malaysia's economic interests may be jeopardised through communicative inefficiency in business and electronic negotiations

with the rest of the world. In order to network with the rest of the world and to take advantage of new office technologies, Malaysians in the business sector must become proficient in the English used in business communities, especially in relation to the variety associated with technology. For Malaysians, English has become an agent of social process and change.

Schools and other educational agencies are being called upon to play a more active and appropriate role in preparing young people for entering the post-industrial work world and to help strengthen the hand of the national economy. Like a football coach, the task of the English for Specific Purpose (henceforth ESP) teacher is to know not only the strengths and weakness of the opponent team, but also to be extremely knowledgeable about the rules and regulations of the game so as to well equip the home team for the sport. In the ESP context, effective teaching of skills means effective operation of mechanisms within the industry. For good practice, the ESP teacher must first understand the society and the mechanisms that operate in that society, before s/he can begin to equip the new workforce with effective skills. This study hopes to contribute towards the understanding of that society by looking at how computer- mediated discourse in particular helps in the logistics, demand creation and channel recruitment of a representative company in Malaysia.

The speech of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir, spoken at the meeting of the Malaysian Business Council on February the 28th. 1992, was the turning point in the economic history of Malaysia. It gave an impetus to what can be called the Malaysian challenge or the challenge to become a developed country by the year 2020. The Prime Minister said in his speech:

We cannot but aspire to the highest standards with regard to the skills of our people, to their devotion to know-how and knowledge upgrading and self-improvement, to their language competence, to their work attitudes and discipline, to their managerial abilities, to their achievement motivation, their attitude towards excellence and to the fostering of the entrepreneurial spirit. (Malaysia - The Way Forward. February 28th. 1991).

This challenge of Malaysia should be seen in the light of socio-economic and political changes in the environment that is, the countries in the Southern hemisphere in relation to the countries in the Northern hemisphere. The South Commission, established in 1987, has the aim of overcoming poverty and improving the quality of life for people living in the developing countries. According to the Report of the South Commission:

Three and a half billion people, three quarters of all humanity, live in the developing countries. By the year 2000, the proportion will probably have risen to four fifths. Together the developing countries - accounting for more than two thirds of the earth's land surface area - are often called the Third World. We refer to them as The South. Largely bypassed by the benefits of property and progress, they exist on the periphery of the developed countries of the North (Report of the South Commission 1990).

The main objective of the people of the South is their desire to escape from poverty and under development and secure a better life for their citizens. In this last decade of the century, the world is in a process of rapid transition and change. Political alignments, economic systems, and social values are being remade. We are also becoming increasingly obvious of the prominent role language plays in establishing, reproducing and changing power relations amidst the social and cultural changes that are taking place. The main reason for this change is the acceleration of scientific and technological advancement and the new importance of the service and cultural sectors as market commodities. The science and technology revolution of the post industrial work world has fundamentally affected societies, economies, and international relations.

These momentous changes provide opportunities from which developing countries can benefit, provided they take into consideration the new changes in the environment. In this new environment, the workers can no longer function as individuals performing repetitive routines but must function as teams in a flexible relationship with the fast-changing business environment. These changes call for a shift in

practices in the workplace towards more individual interaction, group discussion, decision- making and techniques in eliciting and exchanging information etc. These qualitative changes give importance to discourse as a means of social control in the workplace.

Obviously, this is one reason why many corporations in Malaysia are spending vast sums of money in research and training especially in areas where there is 'technologisation of discourse' (author's term).

The findings of The South Commission of 1987, suggest that three factors have an important bearing on the success of the developmental efforts of the countries of the South. **First**, each country will need to organise itself in an effort to overcome under development and dependency, as well as achieve economic growth and modernise its society. **Second**, the countries should harness their national potential and this calls for long term and short term objectives to be spelt out. **Third**, all developing countries will find their progress affected by external factors, which includes the international economy.

It is with this backdrop of the global vision for the South, that Dr. Mahathir's vision of how the Malaysian nation can move forward and become a fully developed country by the year 2020, should be looked at. He first presented this vision at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council on February 28th 1991. It was at this meeting that Dr. Mahathir outlined the Vision 2020 concept. He also pointed out that there can be no fully developed Malaysia until we have finally overcome the nine central strategic challenges that have confronted us from the time we became an independent nation. Of the nine challenges listed two stand out as having important relevance to

this study namely: (i) establishing a scientific and progressive society and (ii) establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient. (Malaysia - The Way Forward 1991).

Malaysia is now gaining ground as a land of opportunities, where natural resources abound, labour costs are still very cost effective, industrial land ample, infrastructure adequate, and the currency strong. All these are encased within a framework of official policies and incentives that provide for a dynamic and efficacious economic climate. According to the Second Outline perspective Plan 1 & 2, in 1989, the Malaysian economy is estimated to have expanded by 8.5 per cent with all sectors recording a strong output growth. Since 1987, the manufacturing sector has emerged as the leading economic sector, followed by the agricultural and the mining sectors.

Malaysia is thus undergoing economic transformation and is fast entering an era of rapid industrialisation. The principal thrust of the Second Outline Perspective Plan 1991-2000 (OPP2) is the promotion of a more balanced, broad-based, resilient and internationally competitive economy so as to provide the foundation for attaining the status of a fully developed nation by the year 2020. As reported in the OPP2,

The nineties will be a challenging decade for human resource development. This is because the economic transformation towards greater industrialisation depends not only on capital resources and technological development, but also on the quality of available human resources (Second Outline Perspective Plan 1991-2000).

It is increasingly obvious that information has become a much sought after commodity for economic success.

Communication skills are necessary for the meaningful production and consumption of information.) To quote Dr. Mahathir:

In the information age that we are living in, the Malaysian society must be information rich. It can be no accident that there is today no wealthy, developed country that is information poor and no information rich country that is poor and underdeveloped. (Second Outline Perspective Plan 1991-2000).

As technology has made this an interdependent and a smaller world, our futures are inextricably linked by trade and commerce to the international economy. In addition, Malaysians have moved from an agricultural emphasis, into the manufacturing sector. Communication, knowledge, and training are crucial factors for success in this sector of the economy. Language, of course, is the main channel for the dissemination of information of any kind, and in the international arena, English language reigns supreme. It is the predominant language of trade and commerce and the chosen international language of the countries of the North. The importance of competence in this language then becomes crucial for survival.

The traditional English language education that we are all used to obviously does not serve the needs of the new developments in the economic and social environment in the country and in the world. The content of the English curriculum has basically been the English Language itself, but what we should be concerned about is to develop and comprehend the way language is involved in the building of meaning in the social processes that an individual is involved in.

Traditionally, language research has generally been done as if interactions are carried out in a linguistically homogeneous group and

the assumption is that interpretive conventions are shared. With greater connectivity and more culturally different groups interacting with one another in English in trade, commerce and politics, this assumption of the previous language research does not hold. As Gumperz (1982), has pointed out:

The experience of modern industrial society with its history of communication breakdowns, of increasingly intricate constitutional and legal disputes and its records of educational failure, suggests that such assumptions may not fit the facts of modern urban life (Gumperz 1982 : 4).

So far there has been not been much empirical evidence in terms of analysing what is required in the way of shared linguistic and cultural knowledge to create and sustain interactive discourse in wholly owned Malaysian business communities. Language education should be viewed as a means to an end and not as an end itself. We need to address this issue seriously if we want to develop an English language education that will serve the needs of the people of the community and thereby meet the national objectives of the country.

Towards this end we need to look at how people cope and what drives the communication in business. Such insights have great implications for the future of the manufacturing sector and its continued success. Economic growth and industrialisation in Malaysia have the potential to generate an incredible amount of international business for Malaysians.

Since English is the international language of trade and commerce, educators need to know how to teach the business community the ways in which they can best capitalise on English as a

resource system. There is, therefore, a great need to document the ways in which business discourse is carried out in Malaysia as it would help towards the development of effective educational programs. It is also obvious, that knowledge of the communication skills needed will to some extent rest on our understanding of the culture of the current business societies, the context within which communication takes place. One way to approach this would be to look at language as primarily involved in the shaping of meaning and hence the development of a culture. This understanding of the culture of the business community is a prerequisite to the understanding of the communication skills needed by the sector.

1.4 ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia had been a colony of the British Empire until 1957, when she gained independence. Then the National Language, the Malay language, was established with the objective of creating a national identity as well as for national integration of the various races in the country. The National Language policy of Malaysia established Malay as the sole national language of the country. Students of the various ethnic groups in the country have all undergone school and tertiary education with Malay as the medium of instruction and Malaysian children now use Malay as their primary language. The official language policy of 1967 which stipulates the use of Malay at all official levels, has further ensured the increased proficiency in the national language among government officials and workers in general, slowly replacing English as the language of administration. Knowledge of the national language is also a prerequisite for citizenship as well as

for employment. Proficiency in the English language was seen to be not very necessary for communication and survival within the country.

1.4.1 ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

English is taught in both the primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Its position is that of a second language. The English language program is planned in accordance with the National Education Policy which has the broad objective of developing a morally upright person. It has been stated that the English language syllabus deals with topics that are drawn from the contexts of the home and school, the community, town and village, the state, the country and finally, leading to the world. The topics provide the context in which the language skills and contents are taught. According to the national curriculum, the objectives of the secondary school English language program, are that students should be able to:

1. listen to and understand spoken English in the school and in real life situations.
2. speak effectively on a variety of topics.
3. read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment.
4. write effectively for different purposes.

(Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah, 1989).

The secondary school English program includes the teaching of listening and speaking skills, reading and writing skills, the sound system, grammar and vocabulary. The teaching of writing skills warrants special mention here as the researcher feels the writing skills provided in schools do not meet the needs of the workplace. The skills

taught are prescriptive and product oriented. For example, the following:

Instructions on how to write a composition must be presented to the students. Students should be guided through the processes of planning drafting, editing and the final writing of the composition. Models of the expected product should be provided. Activities and exercises on grammar and vocabulary which are needed to write the composition must be incorporated in the lesson. (Kurikulum Bersepadu sekolah Menengah, 1989).

Writing is also done at the survival level. The stress is on very simple sentence construction with emphasis on accuracy. Even after ten years of schooling the length of the English Language essay for the end of the tenth year of schooling exam is about 200 words of simple writing. There is very little room for the creative and manipulative use of English. Basically, the curriculum is concerned with teaching language as a system and not as a resource for communication. The skills specified in the syllabus for writing seem to concentrate on the minuscule and not the communication intent. There is emphasis on correct punctuation, spelling, sound system, grammatical structures etc. The aim of the English program in schools is basically to:

equip them with skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah, 1989).

The English language skills as provided by the national curriculum would seem adequate if there is no change in the overall socio-economic conditions in the country. Now, the country is concentrating on the manufacturing sector and on skills and services. These have become the new commodities of the post industrial work world. There is great emphasis on economic networking and communication at the international level. This change in national emphasis has brought about a new need of being competent in the English language, which has been recognised as the language of trade and industry. The English curriculum of the country as it is would now seem inadequate in preparing for the new needs of the workplace — the manufacturing sector. The manufacturing sector of the economy provides for eighty percent of the country's income. There is growing concern in the manufacturing sector in the recruitment of new staff because companies are now looking for potential employees who are very proficient in the English language. This is partly because almost all communication outside the country and with multinationals within the country is in English.

It has been reported in the newspapers within the country that the schools and tertiary institutions in Malaysia are not producing graduates who would fit the communication skills requirements of the various companies in the private sector. It has also been reported that in some telecommunications companies, employees at upper management are mainly composed of Malaysian who have graduated

from universities in foreign countries thus ensuring their competence in the English Language. All these new needs and changes have placed us at the crossroads with regards to English language education. How is official language policy responding to the changing role of the English language. On the one hand, there is the maintenance of traditional language practices of standard English with concerns with spelling, punctuation and grammar, and on the other hand, there is rising expectation on the part of employers and others on the language capabilities of workers. How do we educate citizens for social change, or how do we provide an education that is capable of helping to shape social change? Since language is an instrument of social change (Kress 1988), we must rethink the English curriculum of the country. Education, especially language education plays an important part in developing citizens that contribute to the nation's development and aspirations.

1.5 THE DISCOURSE COMMUNITY SELECTED

Perdana Holding Sdn. Bhd. (pseudonym) has been identified to represent the successful national company that has all the attributes that Dr. Mahathir has identified as being crucial to the achievement of Vision 2020. The company displays characteristics of a viable business that is successful, recognised worldwide and yet very Malaysian in nature and composition.

Perdana won the Export Excellence Awards from the Ministry of Trade and Industry from 1991 to 1994, Asian Institute of Management Awards for 1993 and 1994, Manufacturing Awards from the British Approvals Board for Telecommunications for 1991 and from

1992 to 1995, Innovations, Design and Engineering Awards for the world's first voice - activated speaker phone for 1994 and 1995. (New Straits Times, May 17th, 1995). It is therefore representative of the kind of organisations desirable in the country. The company's commercial interests also fall in line with the key areas identified by the Prime Minister as being the industries that should be promoted and encouraged, namely: telecommunications, metal based industries, information technology, and property management.

1.5.1 PERDANA'S BUSINESS INTERESTS

Perdana's business interests fall into the following main groups.

1.5.1.1 TELECOMMUNICATIONS

The interests include the installation and maintenance of public pay phones, marketing of pay phones and services to neighbouring countries, manufacturing and marketing of telecommunication equipment, power cables, and paging services.

1.5.1.2. METAL -BASED INDUSTRIES

Business interests in this area include, precision engineering and machining of steel parts for the automotive and electronic industries and other products such as manhole covers etc.

1.5.1.3. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Activities include services in systems integration, software development, networking, connectivity, executive information systems

and databases. The company sells, markets and distributes information technology based products manufactured by computer and software vendors. Is also involved in high technology remote sensing, imaging and digital mapping services with application in energy, exploration, forestry, agricultural studies fishery and others.

1.5.1.4. OTHERS

Perdana is also involved in research and development, sells and services heavy electrical engineering for power substation. Is Involved in managing projects in areas such as supplying equipment to the broadcasting, meteorological, civil aviation, postal and power authorities.

Technology has always augmented Perdana Holdings business activities as verbalised in its Mission Statement:

We will fulfil stakeholder expectations by building sustainable businesses through enterprise and technology by focusing on customer needs in areas where we have distinct competitive advantage (Annual Report 1994).

1.5.2.. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Computerisation in Perdana Holdings started in late 1983. Befitting the organisation and its business activities at that time, application systems were developed on a piece-meal basis and catered for the operational needs of various business units.

These systems provided short term needs for survival but did not provide the foundation for a successful long-term strategy. The organisation had a computer system that was organised by function

and not by process. Subsequently the organisation grew rapidly in each of the three major industries it participated; Telecommunications, Information Technology and Automotive. It became increasingly obvious then, that the Information technology they started out with was now not in harmony with the business they have since developed.

This discovery within the organisation that they need to update their technology and recent developments in the world since 1990 started a series of changes in the information technology in Perdana. There were many changes in the environment that made an impact, first there was a drop in hardware costs, secondly in 1994, there was an agreement reached in the computer industry to standardise how programs talk to each other, thirdly, with new markets opening, there were great and astounding business opportunities available, fourthly, manufacturers were now integrating their operations with suppliers and distributors, fifthly, old political systems were crumbling, sixthly, old obstacles to international trade were being slowly broken down. (Donovan, 1994) The speed, scale and scope of business growth coupled by knowledge that in business, all problems and solutions are interdisciplinary and interdependent prompted Perdana Holdings to draw up its Strategic Information Systems Plan (henceforth SISP) in the late 1991. Its objectives were to ensure integrity, consistency, timeliness, accuracy and sharing of information throughout the Group. In addition they were aware that business must constantly adapt to a dynamically changing environment.

They must therefore choose an adaptive, dynamic information architecture that has the flexibility to support both changes in the business environment and changes in technology and this became the primary objective driving the Strategic Information Plan. They also had

the belief that no corporation is without opportunity in this exciting decade.

Essentially, SISP was formulated to support the business needs and priorities driven from Perdana Holdings business strategy and objectives. It is a cohesive plan of how information technology is to be managed and covers all aspects of development, acquisition and implementation of information systems in the Group. It is the decision in April 1993, to sign up with a German company to use their software that made Perdana, the first organisation in Malaysia to go completely on line on a three - tiered client server platform. This decision and foresightedness made the company aware that information technology empowers business and should be looked as a journey not a destination. Such viewpoints confirmed that this organisation was worthy of being the chosen research site. The task of this study is to investigate the kind of technology that supports a successful business like this one and to discover the processes and skills related to the requirements of the industry in relation to technology and the business organisation it empowers.

1.6 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

The study begins by questioning the ways in which new technology in particular computer mediated of communication is used and how an understanding of this medium informs our understanding of the community's social processes and communication. Since technology has broadened the range of communication and users have also developed strategies for using this technology, this study can be seen as a first step in understanding both the way members, or

interactants, communicate and cooperate in a business environment as well as how computer mediated discourse has become incorporated, not just as an additional medium of communication but as the means of communication in the business community. By examining technology mediated communication as a product and a process, I have tried to show how the community uses technology to reach individual members in the community while at the same time ensuring that institutional goals are achieved and maintained. Besides that, examining the communicative events that are technology enabled, has revealed new ways of viewing literacy for this community.

The discourse, or the communicative event, that is generated by the technology is the prime focus. A communicative event refers to the interaction of the subject with any kind of incoming data. The objective is to study how this interaction is organised and realised by technology in the everyday social encounters between members in an organisation. As technology helps to unfold the social structure step by step, the global function or the purpose of the larger institution is achieved. Both linguistic and non-linguistic means are used to realise this global function.

Through an understanding of such everyday interactional social encounters, an individual is socialised into the rules and practices of the social group and becomes a member of it. This study aims to benefit the theory and practice of the enculturation process by showing how technology is structured in its own native environment, how it is used for socialisation, and also how members go about their everyday social encounters through shared meanings and understanding. This study provides for a way of thinking about technology and its related

discourse both as a dynamic ongoing process, and also as a product, a static potential.

1.7 LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE OF STUDY

The study is primarily concerned with the social interactions that take place via computer technology in the course of carrying out the social processes related to the business of the company. In other words, data for this study concentrates on the communication that is computer generated for carrying out business activities. While there may be other forms of communication in the business community, like the telephone, fax machines and face to face talk, these lie outside the scope of this study.

Secondly, the study will not include oral interaction per se. If oral interactions are considered at all, it will be solely for the purposes of clarification and confirmation of computer mediated communication.

The third limitation is the decision to concentrate only on computer mediated written discourse and not other forms of written discourse. This decision is prompted by two major considerations. First, there is a need to provide in-depth research on computer mediated business discourse, because to date there has been no such research done in Malaysia. Secondly, the impact of computer related technologies have greatly influenced genre and language use in business and this study would provide insights for future English for Specific Purpose courses in relation to the business community.

Fourthly, since English is the language of business and trading, (Kachru, 1990; Chan and Goh, 1993; Le Vasan ;1994), data in this study is confined to data that is in the English Language. While the National Language and the other vernacular languages may sometimes be used in formal and informal interactions, these are not considered, even if they are mediated via the computer.

1.8 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Literacy in today's world is very different from what it was at the beginning of this century. The present world demands that people cope with a great range of information and also need to learn to create and respond to changes in information and technology. The new technologies, as well as the society it has helped to shape demand a greater degree of consciousness about the ways of working with these technologies. As yet, not much data has been amassed in Malaysia about the kinds of techno- literacy one needs to possess to participate in the modern business world.

As the technology culture evolves, so too does the many forms of communication within which its ways of thinking, working, and negotiating and dealing with experience, are encoded. There is a need to inform both student and teacher of the ways language and technology are evolving and continuing to change the patterns of communication in the business world.

It is with the objective of understanding the role of technology in communication that this study has been undertaken. The aim is to provide a first hand experience of the knowledge and expertise needed by the future workforce in techno-driven business organisations. The insights gained will help educationists adapt and modify their resources and attitudes to literacy in relation to the training of citizens for their effective participation in society.)

This study hopes to contribute to the understanding of computer mediated communication and the discourse related to it in the business sector. The business sector in Malaysia is not only income generating for the country, but is also one that absorbs most of the labour of the country. Bailey (1987), predicted that by 1990 about fifty percent of the American workforce will be engaged in information employment. This seems to be the trend in Malaysia too. According to UNESCO, literacy for the age of information needs to be redefined as skills that allow one "to engage in all activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning." (Bailey, 1987:393).

According to Bailey, there are now "neo- illiterates", they are those who have, either lost the literacy achieved in primary school or, those who have not reached the level of skill required for effective functioning in the modern world. As yet, we do not have any information about the kinds of literacy skills needed by the new workforce in techno-driven business communities in Malaysia. This study examines the way technology works for the building and ordering of meaning in the target culture - the workplace of the techno-driven business community. The objective is to better understand the community, and the needs of such a community. For the purposes of this study, such an

enterprise involves the examination of the communication network (the process) and the technology (the system) that supports the process in an automated business society. Knowing how communication works in such a community or culture is important because it will enable the individual to operate effectively in the culture and more importantly enable the individual to work for changes within the culture. Technoliteracy is the key not just to technology but to the understanding and practice of technology in a community.

Thus a case study of one representative business community will provide insights into how one successful community incorporates technology into its social processes.

1.9 FOCUS OF STUDY

(A dynamic business organisation is dependent on good communication to keep ahead of competitors and also to take the lead in the market share.) The resulting interaction generated by the members via technology in a communicative or social event in order to achieve the company's goals is referred to as computer mediated discourse. It is concerned with the ways communication is structured and organised and the way in which social meaning is conveyed by the organisation. The first step towards this understanding is to study the community and the technology which is a part of this community. This view is echoed by Saville-Troike:

Any attempt at understanding human communication must first begin with what it is before how or what purpose it is used for is answered (Saville-Troike, 1994:3).

(This is an exploratory study carried out with the aim of throwing some light on a relatively new area. There have been a number of studies on various aspects of Malaysian business but so far there has been no empirical evidence in terms of technology and technology related communication in the business communities in Malaysia.) There is a need to look at how people cope and what drives the communication in these business communities. One needs to know the workplace culture of business organisations that are fully automated. There is also a need to find out how computers and their related systems contribute to the tasks, users, and social practices of the business community.

(Such cultural insights have great implications for the future of the business sector and its continued success.)

This phenomenon, computer mediated discourse, in business activities is looked at from three broad perspectives:

- (i) The core technology or system and how it is organised to drive the social processes in business
- (ii) The communication network or the dynamic unfolding of social processes as they routinely occur in business activities and
- (iii) Other semiotic systems that add to our understanding of (i) and (ii).

The specific objectives of this study are to identify, describe and explain:

- (i) one Malaysian Corporate Discourse Community.
- (ii) how the system or technology is organised and how it both supports and dominates all communication in the organisation.
- (iii) the virtual network involved in the social practices of the company and the role of technology in these social processes.
- (iv) some of the changes brought about by technology on business discourse and the culture of the Malay business community.
- (v) some implications for workplace literacy.

1.10 PLAN OF CHAPTERS

This dissertation comprises eight chapters. Chapter One provides the background to the research. It discusses the global and local perspectives in relation to technology. It also talks about the social and material changes in the society that have impacted the business world. In Chapter One a case is argued for researching into technology related discourse and the significance of such a research in providing for greater understanding of the business community thereby catering to the national needs in terms of Human Resource Development.

Chapter two discusses the theoretical orientations framing this study. These refer to recent trends towards approaches that focus on the social interactional nature of meaning - making. Therefore aspects of ethnography, organisational theories, social and discourse theories and genre theories have been incorporated into the study. The assumption behind this framework is that these theories are not separate but interrelated aspects of the notion of context in meaning - making.

Chapter three discusses the methodology used, the setting, the methods of data collection and the research design. The ethics involved in such research and the problems of validity are also discussed. It is in this chapter that the two pilot investigations that finally led to this research are reported.

Chapters four, five, six and seven present the findings and the discussions. Chapter four and five concentrate on the issues related to the system (the synoptic aspect). Chapter six discusses how the system realises its potential through the dynamic process network (the dynamic aspect). It shows this by concentrating on one business transaction and tracing the social processes involved in the transaction from the beginning to the end. It describes how the social processes are enacted and enabled through technology in this community. Chapter seven carries the explanation of the dynamic social process one step further by analysing one computer mediated business transaction through e-mail for its cultural implications and for its discoursal features. The e-mail selected is a communication with a counterpart in a different country. This is the only communication that is not totally within the organisation and the reason that this communication is included is to show the effects of technology on the culture of the

Malays in this business community. The effects of technology on electronic discourse is also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter eight concludes the dissertation by discussing some implications for literacy. The discussions in this chapter are based on the findings in chapter four and five and six and seven.