CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

College English language programs are designed to include a variety of components to enhance thinking skills such as journal writing, reflective writing, critical analysis, and argumentative essay writing to name but a few. Internationally renowned examinations like the International English Language Testing System (IELTs) and Testing of English as a Foreign Language (ToEFL), which are used as English proficiency entry examinations into overseas universities, all contain a writing section to assess a candidate's argumentative skills. Morgan and Beaumont (2003) suggest that argumentative writing success largely depends on 'the use of supporting evidence; the weighing and evaluating of evidence; qualifying contentions; explaining contexts; acknowledging others points of view; and being assertive but not aggressive' (p.147). Therefore, argumentative writing is crucial for students to master in order to become critical and reflective thinkers and consequently succeed in college and university by being able to express thoughts and opinions effectively.

Student writers do not merely have to have a good command of the language, but should also be able to develop concepts and ideas in order to write convincingly. However, as Gleason (1999) states, 'argumentative writing is an area of great difficuly due to 'its complexity' (p. 81) for students'. The reason for this could be, as Pithers (2000) concluded from a study on college students' critical thinking skills, that college students do not have good thinking skills. Good thinking involves,

> '…being able to identify questions worth pursuing, being able to pursue one's questions through self-directed search and interrogation of knowledge, a sense that knowledge is contestable and being able to present evidence to support one's arguments'(p.238).

However, most adolescents enter college with an 'underdeveloped ability to think critically' (Pithers, 2000 p. 240) and many are unable to make connections and express thoughts and

opinions independently. As a result of these weaknesses, argumentative essay writing is a daunting writing genre for students at this level, which is reflected in the poor content of their essays.

Another obstacle to writing is weak vocabulary. Vocabulary acquisition is crucial for any form of communication, especially writing. College students generally are fluent in spoken language; however, they lack appropriate, formal vocabulary for academic writing. Xu (2009) stresses that 'without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed' (p.69). This illustrates the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition and language use and it follows that weaknesses in this area of language can be detrimental to success in college writing. Lexical knowledge has also been the focus in many SLA theories, as it is the foundation of any language. A study by Zhou (2009) stresses that 'linguistic accuracy plays an important role in the quality of written texts'(p. 31) and found that students in higher education were poor in writing due to weak academic vocabulary and were, therefore, unable to express thoughts and ideas clearly. Due to weak vocabulary, students find writing a challenging task.

To overcome the two problems stated above (weak content and limited vocabulary) writing instructors often provide printed reading materials before assigning argumentative essay questions; texts are chosen from a wide range of sources and offer students various perspectives to help provoke thought and forge opinions on specific topics. This practice is also aimed at helping students pick up relevant and useful vocabulary so that they can enhance their content and vocabulary usage during their writing. The connection between reading and writing has long been established, as good writers are usually good readers and vice versa. Most English as a Second Language (ESL) courses are in line with this belief and most ESL proficiency courses are designed based on skills. In communication studies, too, reading is seen as a receptive skill whilst writing is seen as a productive skill, reflecting

the intimate connection between reading and writing. Krashen (1993) even suggested free voluntary reading as key to improvement in reading skills, linguistic competence, vocabulary, spelling and writing. This view thus further solidifies the importance of reading to enhance writing skills.

However, many college students are uninterested and find this printed form of reading mundane (Durisin, 2002 p.201). The current generation of college students, commonly referred to as the 'Net Generation', 'Millennials', 'Digital Natives' or 'Gen Y' are tech-savvy as they never knew a world without computers or the Internet and consequently, for them, a 'key part of who they are is technology' (Durisin, 2002 p.199). Eisner (2005) also explains that only a combination of speed and interactivity are likely to keep these learners focused. In addition, it was found that more than 40 % of freshman students reported 'they are frequently bored in class' (Pryor et al., 2009 cited in Berk 2009, p.3) and apparently 'unless the content is on their radar screens, it's likely to be rated ―boring' (Berk, 2009, p.3). It is evident that the print mode of reading articles is unappealing to this generation of students and as a result causes their attention to flag.

Therefore, to improve the quality of argumentative essay writing and its instructions, we have to tackle the three problems mentioned above. One promising way is to try and solve the third problem first, which is to motivate college students to read and help them find an interesting method of reading. By doing this, educators and writing instructors need to enhance reading pedagogies. If this can be done, students then can be more motivated or interested in the reading mode; we can expect that this will then lead to more accurate topic vocabulary and better quality of argumentative content.

Since technology, computers and the Internet are the main stimulants to this 'Net Generation' of college students, reading online appears to be more attractive than traditional print reading. As online reading allows for more interactivity, it would be

beneficial to conduct a comparative study of these two modes of reading; Traditional print reading (TPR) and Interactive Online reading (IOR) with a view to measuring the association of these two reading modes on college student writers' vocabulary and content in argumentative essays.

1.2. Contributing Issues

The problems above have not appeared independently, but have grown from other contributing issues which will be explained in this section. One of the main issues which lead to poor writing ability is weak reading. 'Reading in English is consistently shown to be of great concern to Non-Native English speaking students at tertiary level'(Hyland and Tse 2009, p.112).   Although this may be faced by students and educators in educational institutions worldwide, it is a matter of the utmost importance in Malaysia. According to Noor (2006, p. 65), in her review of the relevant literature, students encounter quite a few problems when making the transition from learning at school to learning at university: subject difficulty, lack of motivation, expectation of being 'spoon-fed' with information and notes and not being at all ready for the 'deep approach' reading demands of higher education. Therefore, poor essay-writing performance is indicative of the divided teaching and learning methods and styles adopted between secondary and tertiary levels of education in the country.

Although story-telling, literature, poetry and other genres of writing have a rich history in Asia; the reading habit has not been cultivated in the current generation. As such, in a step to overcome this weakness, the Malaysian government recently appointed local and international movie star Datuk Michelle Yeoh Ambassador for the Information, Communication, and Culture Ministry's 'Come and Read 1Malaysia' campaign' launched on the 18th of March 2010 (Michelle, 2010). The government thus acknowledges this weakness in reading skills amongst the population and hopes 'Malaysians will be

encouraged to cultivate the reading habit' (p. 3). In addition, Weiler (2004) also states that the critical thinking and other cognitive skills of today's students 'are suffering because of the large proportion of time spent in sedentary pastimes, passively absorbing words and images, rather than in reading' (p. 46).

Unlike narrative and descriptive writing, argumentative essays are a form of composition that is usually dreaded by students as they need to reflect and develop their own opinions and thoughts. This issue is also discussed in Weiler's (2004) study, which explains the importance of college students progressing from a dualism stage to a multiplicity stage of cognitive development. In her definition,

'Dualism begins early in intellectual development and often is reflected in the system of beliefs and acquiring knowledge and viewpoints that a student brings with them to college from secondary school and is characterized by the *need for an authority figure to transmit knowledge and beliefs'* (p. 48).

In contrast, 'multiplicity is the ability to acknowledge that the world contains knowledge that the student cannot yet classify as right or wrong, knowledge which requires further study and thought (the so-called "gray area")' (p. 48). Students are comfortable being 'spoon-fed' throughout their previous educational stages to an extent that when they enter college, they are unable to make and develop their own voices on issues. This goes hand in hand with an inability to produce a balanced argumentation, which in its turn leads to weak content in their argumentative essays.

Another contributing factor to these problems is, as Weiler (2004) and Deng and Hu (2007) confirm that college students today are primarily visual learners, a learning style which easily conflicts with the teaching preferences of instructors who prefer using traditional methods. Deng and Hu (2007) elaborate on ESL teaching methods in Chinese

schools which still adapt the 'drilling' method of repeating and reciting words in order to enhance vocabulary. This study also found that these learners are unable to express themselves or communicate effectively in English with ease. The main problem may lie in the traditional teaching methods as this will easily conflict with the learning styles and habits of most educators. Therefore, considering the fact that these learners are mainly visual learners, and the fact that this generation of college students is more inclined to computers and the Internet, teaching pedagogies need to be changed so as to enable effective learning.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In the previous section, it was established that reading and writing are related skills. With the rapid growth of technology and the Internet, online interactive reading has gained much attention among educators as an alternative pedagogy. This appears to be unavoidable looking at the gradual extended notion of text today. Chorney (2005) describes interactive reading as a process where individuals have control over the text they are reading, creating their own unique reading process and this control enables them to influence the nature of the reading process in that they are able and free to participate actively in the construction of meaning of whatever they are reading. In addition, Coiro (2003) stresses that 'electronic texts introduce new supports as well as new challenges that can have a great impact on an individual's ability to comprehend what he or she reads' (p. 461). As such, by reading interactively online, learners have the opportunity to actively participate in the construction of knowledge from the text according to their individual ability. This concept of reading is opposite to traditional print reading (TPR) which constructs a passive reader and often treats the learner as a mere 'receptacle' (Chorney, 2005) of information. All of this supports the conclusion that interactive online reading (IOR) may favourably affect students reading abilities. The IOR mode may thus provide educators with an alternative reading pedagogy

that will help stimulate genuine engagement and interest, which in their turn may help improve the quality of student writing.

Incorporating interactive reading pedagogies into the college curriculum will, of course, also depend on the availability of an adequate Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure. Currently, e-learning and ICT have taken center stage with provisions made for the incorporation of technology in teaching by the Malaysian government, in the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010). Some of the initiatives in this plan include providing sufficient ICT equipment to all educational institutions, helping them develop an appropriate ICT curriculum and forms of assessment, encouraging the integration of ICT into teaching and learning and upgrading ICT knowledge and skills (Ismail, 2009). In a recent news article, the Malaysian Education Ministry stressed the importance of the use of ICT in education and acknowledges that,

> '…children find learning through the computer very interesting and absorbing. This is because ICT provides a window to the most recent knowledge available in the world, and it does not limit teachers and students to their locality *like traditional print reading* materials' (No, 14 March 2010, p. 14)

However, although all provisions have been made by the Malaysian government, this initiative is failing (Samuel and Zaitun, 2007). A large percentage of teachers have the necessary ICT skills but the utilization of the available ICT facilities is below par. Thus, it is hoped that this comparative study will motivate teachers to reconsider the use of ICT; after all, a majority of schools have adequate technological support and much of the learning materials are readily available on trusted websites.

As a final comment, Hyland (2003) urges teachers to identify learners' self-perceived needs and wants in second language (L2) writing syllabus design and lesson planning and to 'modify our teaching to better accommodate our students' (p. 58).

Traditional pedagogies and teacher-centered classrooms based on pen and paper, blackboard and chalk are fast becoming a practice of the past with ICT taking over in the new millennium. It is clear from the preceding discussion that Net Generation students want more ICT, more interactivity and arguably also more independent learning. One way of meeting this need is through the provision of online reading assignments. However, whether online reading will also benefit students' writing has not yet been fully explored. The present study will try to determine the impact of IOR and TPR modes on writing and more particularly argumentative essay writing.

1.4. Objectives of the study

While the rationale for this online reading study has been explained in the sections above, we can now turn to the primary focus of this study. The two main objectives that this comparative experimental study aims to investigate are:

i) to identify the differences and similarities between the IOR and TPR modes in how they affect the quality of content of argumentative writing and

ii) differences and similarities between the online IOR and TPR modes in how they affect the use of vocabulary in argumentative writing.

Besides, it is hoped that the findings of this study will be beneficial to various stakeholders, and especially, Malaysian ESL educators and curriculum or syllabus developers. If IOR can indeed be shown to enhance vocabulary use and argumentation, then they would be well advised to consider incorporating a richer and wider variety of reading modes in the curriculum.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the objectives above, two specific research questions have been formulated to guide this study:

i. To what extent are TPR and IOR different in how they affect the quality of college students' argumentation in argumentative writing?

ii. To what extent are TPR and IOR different in how they help or hinder college students' use of topic-specific vocabulary in argumentative writing?

These research questions above are the focus of the study and will guide the literature that will be reviewed. In addition, the research questions act as a point of reference in determining the research instruments and data processing methods which are most appropriate to this study in the following chapters of this study.

1.6 Hypotheses

In order to help answer the research questions stated above, the hypotheses that inform the study are as follows:

i. Reading mode affects the quality of content in ESL argumentative writing

ii. Reading mode affects the use of ESL topic-specific target vocabulary in argumentative writing

Like the research questions, these hypotheses will aid in guiding the literature review and design of the research.

1.7 Scope of the Study

A variety of writing genres are taught at college level, namely: narrative, compare and contrast, cause and effect, journaling, critical reviews, etc. However, argumentative essay writing appears the most daunting, as elaborated in Section 1.1 above. It is for this reason that this study will focus on argumentative essay writing. It is hoped that the results will help teachers and students tackle more adequately the problems involved in this particular genre of writing.

Hyland (2003) stresses that it is important for essays to consist of 'substantive content' (p. 14) in order to be an effective piece of work. Vocabulary is another aspect vital

to writing, as without good lexical knowledge, it would be difficult to write well. As Krashen put it, 'when students travel, they don't carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries' (cited in Segler et al., 2002, p. 409). The main focus of this study will be on the effect of the mode of reading on the vocabulary *usage* and not on the improvement of vocabulary. So, in order to be a 'good writer', the key components are content and vocabulary. This study's aim is thus to assess college students' argumentative writing with respect to two variables:

    i.   total types and tokens of vocabulary used and more particularly, the words, phrases and expressions that are specific to the topic and

    ii.   quality of content, i.e. presence of thesis statements, support, arguments and counterarguments posed.

Even though it is generally accepted that writing quality depends on a variety of elements including organization of content, paragraph structure, syntax, etc., the focus of this study has been narrowed down to only the two main aspects stated above.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

As with all other studies, not all aspects of a research topic can be addressed. The present study too has its limitations:

1.   This study will assess argumentative writing among ESL learners at one institution of higher education in Malaysia. As the researcher is currently employed at this institution, it was easy and convenient for data-gathering purposes while this also helped reduce all other variables that may affect the findings of this study.

2.   The sample size of 45 participants may appear to be minimal but this was due to timetabling constraints. Even so, this limitation was overcome by

conducting 2 experiments and an in-depth analysis of the students' authentic writing materials.

3.   Due to time constraints of two weeks to cover the argumentative genre of writing in the syllabus, this study was limited to two IOR and two TPR texts related to a topic in the syllabus for comparison.

4.   This study will be assessing the differences in vocabulary usage between two groups of students, one group using the IOR mode and another group using the TPR mode. Therefore, there will not be a pre-test to evaluate students' overall vocabulary range: it is assumed that the two groups of respondents have the same lexical proficiency level as the students have similar O-level and English Placement Test scores.

Nonetheless, none of the above limitations negatively affect the study's validity or reliability, as all variables have been reduced and taken into account.

1.9 Significance of the Study

This study is of the utmost significance in today's education landscape in Malaysia, as it would provide a means for effective teaching and learning different from traditional practices. It will also be timely as the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister launched the Information, Technology and Communications in Education Policy, which aims to make ICT the prime mover in the teaching and learning process (Karim, 2010). This policy focuses on eight main areas in education namely;

- Structural realignment of ICT management

- Competency and professional development

- Technology infrastructure

- Total cost of ownership

- Support and maintenance technology

- Teaching and learning

- Community involvement

- Education management and administration

Therefore, the findings of this study would be relevant to various parties, including, of course, ESL educators and syllabus developers. They stand to benefit directly from any research that is able to establish the true effectiveness in learning via the ICT teaching environment.

The findings obtained from this study could also be used to assess whether in the Malaysian classroom, the use of ICT is truly effective. In addition, the findings of this study could also contribute to the existing body of literature on the role of technology in education, specifically in the Malaysian context and generally towards Gen Y. Further, the findings from this study could be relevant to researchers and educators interested in the Constructivist theory of teaching and learning and overall, in new discoveries in ICT-based teaching and learning.

1.10 Definition of Terms

Below is a list of terms and definitions which will be used in the following chapters:

Writing

'Writing is a complex interaction of cognitive and physical factors. It allows for the creation of ideas and information with written symbols and words' (Bromley, 2003, p.144).

and it involves:

'…conceptual knowledge; vocabulary; knowledge of standard form; grammar, spelling, and punctuation; handwriting ease; small muscle development; and eye-hand coordination' (Bromley, 2003, p.144).

Besides this, it:

> '..comprises of three core activities; planning, composing and revising' (Torrance et al. 2000, p.182).

Argument

Morgan and Beaumont's (2003) definition of arguments is as:

'a set of propositions about a topic ordered in a coherent sequence with each proposition supported by the appropriate form of evidence, depending whether the claims are empirical, conceptual or normative' (p. 147).

Argumentative essay

This genre of writing:

> '…is one that not only presents a position on a controversial topic and gives one or more supporting arguments for the stance taken, but also takes the opposing position into accounts by presenting arguments that refute potential counter-arguments and/or by stating restrictions or specifications of the defended viewpoint' (Delphine and Caroline, 2002 p. 309).

Reading

The general definition of reading provided by Nassaji (2003) is as follows:

> 'a multivariate skill involving a complex combination and integration of a variety of cognitive, linguistic, and nonlinguistic skills ranging from the very basic low-level processing abilities involved in decoding print and encoding visual configurations to high-level skills of syntax, semantics, and discourse, and to still higher-order knowledge of text representations and the integration of ideas with the reader's global knowledge' (p. 261).

This definition encompasses the general nature and skills involved when reading a text, be it in the form of traditional print or reading interactively online.

Interactive online reading (IOR)

This mode of reading obviously involves skills similar to those needed in reading as defined above; however, the significant difference is in the mode that is used in presenting the text, in this case via the computer screen and the Internet.

Therefore, certain features in the text used in interactive online reading and traditional print text are not parallel. Coiro (2003) defines interactive reading as:

> 'a range of symbols and multiple-media formats including icons, animated symbols, photographs, cartoons, advertisements, audio and video clips, virtual reality environments, and new forms of information with nontraditional combinations of font size and color'(p.462).

The interactive online reading text used in this study will be a multi-media, stimulated virtual reality environment which will provide 'more lifelike' (Smith, 2002, p. 664) images than those found in traditional print.

1.11 Summary

Advances in communicative technology and the Internet as a source of information have dramatically and drastically changed the landscape of everyday life and all the more so for educators and learners. This simple and user-friendly learning medium will be able to enhance motivation in many ESL classrooms today. In addition, the astronomical amount of information available has a strong impact on current teaching and learning environments. This study will investigate one aspect of this new pedagogical tool, namely, the interaction between reading mode and essay-writing.