CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

Technology has played a major role in the teaching and learning process since the 1960s (Narkhede, 2000). It is undeniable that technology has brought great impact in the teaching and learning context. With the use of technology, learners can learn more effectively and this can lead to better achievements in learning.

With the advances in technology, the teaching and learning process has greatly changed. There is now greater use of information technology in many learning institutions. It is very common to see the use of the computer as an alternative teaching and learning tool in many classrooms.

Using the Internet in the classroom is a recent phenomenon in many institutions of higher learning, but it is definitely becoming a common teaching and learning tool as technology is the "in thing" in this new millennium. By making use of the computer, learners become more actively involved in the learning or application of concepts. Furthermore, learners are engaged in a more meaningful and interesting learning context. They can make use of the various facilities provided by the Internet in their learning such as e-mail, internet relay chat, web sites and others. The Internet is an electronic resource which provides vast amounts of information and ideas via servers. Thus, it is a rich resource which provides learners various ideas and authentic materials for their learning.

One of the most widely used tools on the Internet for teaching and learning is the World Wide Web. As defined by Teeler and Gray (2000), "the World Wide Web is the graphic and text files published on the Internet that offers clickable links to other pages and sites". Thus, when we open a web page, we can view a file that includes text, images and possibly audio and video sequences. Meanwhile, the web site is a collection of one or more related web pages (Teeler and Gray, 2000). With the various features provided by the World Wide Web, it is regarded a valuable teaching and learning tool.

Currently, many educators and researchers are closely studying and investigating the use of the web sites via the Internet as a teaching and learning tool for the purpose of enhancing students' learning. This is because web sites can provide a vast variety of information in the form of text and graphics (Teh, 1998). Past researchers have examined the effects of using the Internet in teaching and learning. For example, according to Selinger (2001), in subject-based studies particularly in Mathematics, Science and English, there is evidence that learning is enhanced through the use of technology via the Internet. Another example is the report of 219 studies conducted by the Software Publishers Association which concludes that technology, that is, via the Internet, is making a significant impact in education (Selinger, 2001). Thus, we can see that the Internet has great potential as a learning tool for our students especially in the case of ESL students.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The use of technology has significant impact on the learning of most of the subjects taught in schools, colleges and universities. Language learners, specifically learners of the English language, can also make use of the existing new and modern technologies. Teaching and learning English using web sites is fast gaining popularity among both language educators and ESL learners. In the Malaysian context, learning English using web sites may not be a common feature, however, it has started to gain popularity among some Malaysian language educators. Using the Internet, particularly the web site, has a positive effect on learning especially in learning English as a second language. This is because most web sites are written in English as it is an international language. In addition, there are also many web sites that have been created specifically for the teaching and learning of English by ESL experts and instructors worldwide. Learners will be keen to learn the language since there are variety of topics covered which could be chosen by them according to their interests.

In learning English, learners are required to be competent in all the four language skills, namely the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. ESL learners can in fact take advantage of certain web sites to improve these four skills. This is because some of the web sites are created to meet the learners' specific language needs. They are designed to be used in the learning of certain skills. For example, they can make use of web sites such as www.classroom.com and www.corbis.com which are sites that can be utilized for writing activities or they can

make use of web sites like www.alexit.com and www.crayon.net which are sites for reading activities.

Although the Internet is considered as a useful learning tool, it has not been determined if web sites have been fully utilized for purposes of learning in our classrooms. In view of this, there is a need to investigate the use of web sites as a tool in learning English and to establish the extent to which it is useful for language learning. Hence, in this study the researcher will focus on the use of web sites in learning English among ESL learners in a specified Malaysian context, Universiti Teknologi MARA classrooms.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The main objectives of this research are to investigate the use of web sites in the English language classroom as well as to study the perceptions of ESL learners and English language teachers on the use of web sites as a learning and teaching tool. Thus, by investigating the use of web sites and by studying the learners' and teachers' perceptions on the use of web sites as a learning and teaching tool, language educators would have better insights into the implications of the use of web sites in ESL classroom learning.

Therefore, this research will:

1. Examine how web sites can be used by ESL learners to enhance their language learning.
2. Investigate the learners' and the English language teachers' perceptions on the use of web sites as a tool for language learning and teaching.
3. Compare the perceptions of the learners and the perceptions of the English language teachers on the use of web sites as learning and teaching tool.

4. Identify the problems that learners may face while using web sites as a tool for language learning.
5. Determine the limitations and implications of using web sites as a tool in language learning.

These aims are then translated into the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the ways in which web sites can be used to enhance students' language learning.
2. To describe the perceptions of students and teachers on the use of web sites in the language learning and teaching context.
3. To summarize the differences between the students' and the teachers' perceptions on the use of web sites as a tool in language learning.
4. To list out the potential problems that students may face in the use of web sites in language learning
5. To identify the limitations and implications of using web sites in the language learning and teaching context.

1.3   Rationale of the Study

The rationale of this study is to provide support for the contention that the use of the Internet via web sites can enhance language learning. The learners' investigative skills can be developed as they have to search through the vast resources available on the World Wide Web for specific information. By using the World Wide Web, their interest in learning is increased due to the manner in which information is presented. The presentation is either in textual and graphic forms or in hypertext forms (Teh, 1998). Therefore, learners who use the WWW are able to engage in more interesting learning sessions that can lead to better performance in their studies. This view is supported by Zoraini Wati and Tungku Mahani (1996), who describes this new technology as a source of motivation that can arouse students' interest and curiosity while using the materials and also in using the computer. Furthermore, Bratt (1993), Carlitz (1995) and Gasperini (1994) have all

noted that students find activities on the Internet useful especially in the learning of English. Holte (1995) also regards the Internet as a useful tool since it provides opportunities for students to learn in various situations and contexts. Therefore, this makes the Internet via the World Wide Web a significant learning and teaching tool in the classroom context.

1.4   Research Questions

The study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the use of web sites help ESL learners in their language learning?
2. What are the perceptions of the learners on the use of web sites in language learning?
3. What are the perceptions of the teachers on the use of web sites in the ESL classroom as a tool in helping their students learn English?
4. What are the problems faced by the learners when using web sites for language learning?
5. What are the limitations and implications of using web sites in the language learning and teaching context?

1.5   Significance of the Study

The main significance of this study is that it will help to determine whether the web sites can be an effective tool in helping ESL learners enhance their language learning. It is believed that many ESL educators put great emphasis on the use of technology when conducting language lessons in the classroom. Therefore, this study can help determine whether the web site is in fact an effective tool in language learning.

If it is found that learning using the web site is an effective mode of language learning, then ESL educators should utilize the web site as part of their teaching

repertoire in the classroom. In addition, the web site is considered to be an up-to-date and current source of information, so ESL educators should take advantage of this useful tool.

In the local context, not many language educators are making use of these rich resources in their classroom teaching although there are many web sites that have been designed specifically for the learning of the English language. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings of this study will help to encourage both language educators as well as ESL learners, to use this widely available resource as a teaching and learning tool.

1.6   The Limitations of the Study

There are a few limitations to this study. One of the limitations is that this study is restricted to the Internet resources on the World Wide Web and will not take into account other Internet facilities, such as the IRC (Internet Relay Chat), E-Mail (Electronic Mail) and video conferencing. The resources are also limited to selected English Language resources on the Internet namely: Dave Sperling's ESL Café (http://www.eslcafe.com), Interesting Things for ESL Students (http://manythings.org), Karin's ESL Partyland (http:// www.eslpartyland.com), the ESL Gold (http://www.eslgold.com), the Tower of English (http://towerofenglish.com) and BBC Learning English (http://www.bbc.co.uk/world service/learning english). My research will only cover the use of 6 web sites due to time constraints.

Another limitation is that different web sites have different learning orientations. Some web sites adhere to the drill method or behaviourist approach to learning rather than the interactive or communicative approach. Therefore, this factor may affect the outcome of the research findings. However, the web sites chosen for this research are based on a combination of both, the behaviourist and communicative approaches. They are also interactive in the sense that the learners can navigate to access information, to make cross references and also to give and receive feedback.

The other limitation is the sample size. The sample comprises 40 students and 5 teachers. This will only serve as a minority of the ESL learners in comparison to the whole population of ESL learners in Malaysia. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to all teachers and ESL learners in Malaysian universities.

Another limiting factor is that the period of observation will only last 6 weeks due to the time factor in carrying out this research. This of course will affect the measurement of effectiveness of the chosen web sites as a tool in learning English.