

USE OF AN ONLINE FORUM TO PROMOTE USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
AMONG ENGINEERING UNDERGRADUATES

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*To my beloved ones*

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## ABSTRACT

This study looks into the use of an online forum towards promoting use of the English language among engineering undergraduates at Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein. In this study, eleven students from different demographic and educational backgrounds participated in an online forum on various topics of discussion created in a virtual platform over a period of twenty two weeks. An asynchronous online platform was used as a tool and site to collect electronic data consisting of messages posted by participants throughout the duration of the study. Research data was collected, coded and analyzed qualitatively using instruments of participant observation, informal conversation and content analysis. At the end of the study it was found that the various participants despite their differences in academic, proficiency and ethnic backgrounds were encouraged by the freedom of use whereby they had an interestingly unique online opportunity to use the language both for academic and socializing purposes. They were found to be freely and openly indulging in online communication activities touching on many topics of interest using the English language. The study also found that participants used various linguistic features when communicating inside the medium. The online forum, thus, proves beneficial and may serve as a very useful tool towards assisting students to use the English language freely and purposefully in their daily settings.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka penggunaan forum talian ke arah mempromosikan penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar sarjana muda kejuruteraan Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn. Dalam kajian ini seramai sebelas orang pelajar daripada pelbagai latarbelakang demografi dan pendidikan mengambil bahagian dalam diskusi secara talian berhubung pelbagai tajuk perbincangan selama dua puluh dua minggu berturut-turut. Sebuah platform atas talian telah digunakan sebagai alat dan lokasi bagi tujuan mengutip data elektronik yang mengandungi mesej yang dikirim secara elektronik oleh para peserta sepanjang jangka masa kajian. Data kajian telah di kumpulkan, kod dan analisa secara kualitatif dengan menggunakan instrumen pemerhatian, temu bual informal dan analisa kandungan. Di akhir kajian didapati bahawa para peserta yang terdiri daripada pelbagai latarbelakang pendidikan, penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris dan kumpulan etnik mendapat galakan oleh kebebasan penggunaan forum berkenaan dimana mereka mendapat peluang menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris bagi tujuan akademik dan bersosial secara talian yang unik lagi menyeronokkan. Didapati mereka begitu bebas dan secara terbuka mengambil bahagian dalam perbincangan elektronik menyentuh pelbagai topik yang menarik minat dengan menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris. Hasil kajian juga mendapati para peserta menggunakan pelbagai ciri linguistik sewaktu berkomunikasi dalam platform atas talian tersebut. Dengan yang demikian, forum secara talian ini terbukti bermanfaat dan boleh dijadikan alat yang amat berguna ke arah membantu pelajar menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris secara bebas dan bermakna dalam seting seharian.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

IT	-	Information Technology
ICT	-	Information Communication Technology
CALL	-	Computer-Assisted Language Learning
L2	-	Second Language
ESL	-	English as a Second Language
CMC	-	Computer-Mediated Communication
F2F	-	Face- to- face
NS	-	Native Speaker
NNS	-	Non-Native Speaker
CC	-	Cyber Café
MOO	-	MUD Object Oriented
PMR	-	Penilaian Menengah Rendah
SPM	-	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
VLE	-	Virtual Learning Environment
KUiTTHO	-	Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn
CL	-	Collaborative Learning
URL	-	Uniform Resource Locator
AOL	-	America On-Line
CNN	-	Cable News Network

SOS	-	Save-Our-Soul
VLI	-	Virtual Learning Instructor

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Internet is now the "*in-thing*" in education not only in universities but also in other learning institutions all over the world. With more colleges and universities getting fully hooked to the net and many more multimedia computer facilities provided for the educational benefits of the students the notions of "*cyber learning*", "*virtual classrooms*", "*e-learning*" (Rosenberg, 2001; Jones, 1995) emerged paving ways for more technologically effective means of teaching and learning the English language. Countries like Canada, the United States, and Sweden have already computerized their schools towards producing more computer literate citizens. According to a survey (The New Straits Times, 2000:16), Canada has become the first country in the world to connect all of its public schools to the Internet. This is followed by the United States where about 95 % of its grade schools have access to the Internet (MSBN, 2000) signifying the prominent awareness and commitment of the American education authorities towards nurturing and producing more IT literate population. It has been reported that in 1997 there were about 20 million people and organizations using the Internet for global instantaneous communication through the World Wide Web (Benjamin Franklin Institute of Global Communication, 1997). USA Today (2000) reported that there is now about 76.4 million Internet users globally. However, according to a very recent report, it is estimated that there are 300 million people world wide who have access to the Internet and this figure is projected to increase sharply to 1 billion by the year 2003 (Gates, 2000 cited from The New Straits Times, 2000:16).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the use of computers especially for the teaching and learning of English is still very new and far from being satisfactory. Only very recently, the Smart School Programme (Sekolah Bestari) was first launched in 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999). Beginning with a pilot project involving 85 secondary schools and 5 primary schools the programme hopes to gradually “computerize” all remaining 8000 primary and secondary schools in the country thus setting a new paradigm in the educational system of our learning institutions. In a more recent development, the Ministry of Education plans to build about 2000 computer laboratories for use by school children as an extension of the "*Sekolah Bestari*" programme (Smart School Programme).

With the increased availability of networked computers in every walk of life in different parts of the world, from classroom to public library, from home to workplace or Internet café, the opportunities provided for learning online are expanding exponentially. For language learners, the possibility of accessing authentic L2 materials and "meeting" native and non-native speakers of that language in a virtual environment has never been greater—or easier or faster. And yet, for many language learners with access to the appropriate technology, these opportunities are not being optimally exploited. The potential of the Internet to allow learners to communicate not with their machines but with other, real people, both native and non-native speakers of the English language, is too often ignored. Instead, they sit at their computers and use "traditional" Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL) packages to interact with machines rather than with flesh-and-blood; if they access the Web at all, it is to participate in similar activities there. The role of the computer is that of an electronic "teacher" rather than as a tool to increase participation in and knowledge of different real (and virtual) communities.

## 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In Malaysia, the position of English is that of a second language and is used extensively. It is a means of communication in many everyday activities including job situations. Regarded as an important language, it helps in local and international trade and commerce, contributing towards making Malaysia a fully developed nation. It also provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and recreational achievements. Faced with the more challenging era of globalization, IT and knowledge-based environments the English language is definitely a prerequisite for national development and achievements in most respect. The English Language programmes in the Malaysian educational curriculums offered at school and tertiary levels thus aim to provide the basis for meeting these needs.

At school level, the English language is taught for a minimum of eleven years right from the very early stage of primary education (210 minutes per week) until the end of secondary education (200 minutes per week). Very recently, the subject is also introduced at higher secondary level of education with the aim of preparing students with a basic level of English they need prior to entrance into anyone of the local institutions of higher learning. The latest development in the emphasis for mastery of the target language is the use of English as the medium of instruction for Physical Education and Living Skills subjects at all primary schools and the introduction of a new English called Technical English which is still under consideration by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (Utusan Malaysia, 2000b)

The main reason for the great emphasis placed on proficiency of the English language at university level is to enable students to use the target language effectively for academic and professional developments. Among others, they are expected to use the language for purposes of negotiating, establishing contacts, securing business deals,

managing meetings and interviews, delivery of knowledge and information, requesting for information, preparing proposals and reports and a whole lot more of what is expected of professionals in a global working environment. Thus, students are exposed to and expected to use the target language at maximum level both in speaking and writing. With a high level of mastery in the target language it is hoped that our future graduates would be able to gain international recognition as working professionals and contribute extensively towards nation building.

However, contrary to the ideal intentions and efforts as envisioned by the Ministry of Education the actual scenario as regards mastery of the English language among our students is not very encouraging. The situation is rather disappointing where an alarming number of our undergraduates are still very weak in their command of the English language both in writing and in the spoken form. In many ways, this has contributed greatly towards their poor performance in academic work as claimed by many academicians.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The main problem related to this topic of study that warrants corrective action is that Malaysian ESL learners are not given enough opportunity to use the English language in everyday settings. The problem dated back from the day Bahasa Kebangsaan, the National Language, was officially used as the medium of instruction in almost every aspect of formal matters including education. There was a lot of discontentment among members of the cabinet and the Ministry of Education over the low level of achievement in the command of the English language among school and university students. Furthermore, a sizeable number of students particularly those in the rural areas, could not even utter one complete sentence in English during Sijil Pelajaran



Malaysia oral examinations after having learnt the language for eleven years since Primary One!.

In terms of socio-cultural environment, a sizeable number of our students reside and attend schools in the rural areas, where English is not spoken at all either in the homes or streets. Sometimes, their only exposure to English outside the English classrooms is through television, assuming that they do watch some of the English TV programmes.

Many undergraduates, it seems, do not have the necessary ability to communicate in the English language well and are unable to conduct thorough and high quality research due to their poor command of the target language. According to one prominent academician (Royal Profesor Ungku Abdul Aziz, 2000 cited from The Star, 9 Sep 2000:16), the Malay group is the most seriously affected of them all and are, thus, left behind in terms of academic achievement. He also stressed that because of this lack of proficiency in the English language hence having limited access to reference materials of which 80 - 90 % of them are in the English language this group of students is unable to perform well in science and engineering related subjects as compared to the other main ethnic groups of students namely the Chinese and Indians.

The main cause of the problem with our undergraduates is that many of them are shy, reticent or plain reluctant to use the language. Both inside and outside the classroom our undergraduates do not use the English language even when warranted to do so for purposes of refuting to remarks that are against their religious beliefs, expressing opinions in face-to-face oral interactions and other classroom tasks involving speech. For instance, there were times when my Malay students, who are all Muslims, preferred to remain silent to the suggestion put forward by their non-Muslim classmates that gambling in sports is alright. These students are actually shy and afraid to make mistakes

only to be looked down upon, ridiculed, teased and laughed at by their friends hence prefer to “hide” in silence (Bahiyah, 1992). According to Abdul Razak (cited from The Sun 2001:20) many of our university students are not articulate and rarely challenge their lecturers in academic discussions. They prefer to be spoon-fed just as how they were taught the language when they were in school. At a higher level, there is greater justification for the need to improve on the standard of English language among our citizens. According to a report in one of the local dailies (The Star, 1994) the younger Malaysian diplomats were not proficient enough in the command of their spoken English language and that they had been rather passive and at times ignorant participants at important international conferences and meetings. If the situation persists the consequence would lead to serious complications where the nation might lose out to other nations in terms of garnering political clout, striking investment opportunities and gaining a better position in international forums and meetings where Malaysia has great interests.

Another problematic factor that contributes to this sad-state-of affair as regards the use of the English language among our undergraduates is the lack of exposure or opportunity to practice and use the language effectively both in writing and in the spoken form. Ever since the medium of instruction in all institutions of learning in Malaysia has been changed to Bahasa Melayu (the National Language) the standard of English has been declining rapidly. The decline was so staggering that there was once in 1980 only a deplorable pass of eight percent was achieved in the then Malaysian Certificate Examination (New Straits Times, 1980) and the situation has not improved completely ever since.

At university level, exposure in terms of credits and the amount of hours provided for the learning of the English language is very minimal. Throughout their study at the university, students are exposed to the formal learning of the language at a minimum of between 2 - 3 contact hours per semester for a range of between 2 - 9

semesters. For instance, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn (KUiTTHO) each offer a minimum of six credit hours of English language throughout their four-year study. Meanwhile, the English language offered at Universiti Malaysia Sabah is slightly more which is nine credit hours. Nevertheless, compared to the total amount of credit hours for all subjects offered at any one particular university, which is between the range of 100 - 120 credit hours, the six hours offered to undergraduates is still considered limited and insufficient since much of the subjects taught at this high level of education necessitates the use of the English language either in the form of reference materials or delivery of instruction. This is due to the fact that most if not all science, technical and engineering subjects including law are offered using the target language by as much as 99 % of instructional delivery time (Profesor Dr. Anuar Zaini cited from Utusan Malaysia, 2000:5). In addition, some subjects offered involved foreign lecturers who use the English language as the medium of instruction.

In terms of the learning process and as regards autonomy of use of English, it is a normal scenario in many TESL classroom settings to see lessons being led by the teacher or lecturer. The task of initiating and sustaining interactive and communicative endeavours continues to remain problematic, even to veterans of the communicative method of instruction.

Of equal importance is, of course, the acquisition of, or performance of, the target language itself. In Japan, for example, focus-on-form has been a prevalent approach to teaching English to Japanese students. This kind of approach has relied on decontextualised translation at the sentence level, and the pedantic manipulation of arcane grammatical forms. The role of English as a medium of communication has been eclipsed by the gatekeeping role of the university English entrance exam. The candid opinion of one senior EFL Japanese university student is given verbatim as follows:

Japanese study English for long years, sometimes more than ten years. Japanese learn difficult grammar, learn even thousands of English words by heart for the entrance examination system. Some say that in the world there are no people who study English as hard as Japanese. But most of Japanese can't understand natural speed English, can't express ourselves in English. TOEFL scores of Japanese is very low level in the world. In this point, Japanese seems to be cursed. What on the earth is wrong? (Gray, 1992)

Though the case among ESL learners in Malaysia is not as bad as those faces by their Japanese counterparts,, the failure of certain foreign language teaching methodologies is acknowledged, new technology has foreshadowed innovative pedagogical possibilities. The development of computer-based tools to assist teaching and learning means that the traditional roles of the teacher and student will undergo a dramatic change. As one researcher sees it:

As such, teachers should not expect to do as they have done. As many colleagues acknowledge, the teacher becomes a designer of tasks: he or she no longer directs what students do, but instead creates an environment of expectation and of possibility where students are responsible for what and how they learn. (Patrikis, 1997) and in this study the use of technology hopes to achieve those expectations and possibilities.

According to Kavaliauskiene (2002), many EFL teachers experience the frustration of investing endless energy in designing interesting, from the teacher's point of view, tasks and organizing various activities for students, but getting little response. Learners are often reluctant to use the target language in pair or small group work. Students do not reflect on their mistakes and, consequently, do not learn from their errors. Even really motivated learners do not always seem to attain their potential.

He discovered that the common phenomenon among learners is ESL students assume a passive role in their process of learning -- they lack autonomy in learning and

rely too much rely on teachers. They are also reluctant to develop a sense of responsibility for the outcome of their learning. He added that it is unreasonable to expect that encouraging a student to become more independent, or autonomous, in acquiring language skills will bring about any tangible changes.

He recommends that learners be made aware of the ways they learn best, which involves their learning styles and strategies (Brazis, Kavaliauskienė, 2000). Naturally, it takes time for learners to find out what are the most effective techniques and activities for each person.

Secondly, learners have to change their passive attitude to learning to a more active attitude, i.e. to become less dependent on the teacher and take charge of their own learning. Teacher's role is to involve students in search for interesting materials, e.g. surfing the Internet, or finding pen-friends on the Internet, taking part in competitions, chat-clubs, encouraging to read English books, newspapers, magazines, etc.

Finally, learners have to be given a chance to gain experience in 'swapping places' with a teacher, which means changing the traditional role of a teacher, developing the art of negotiation, emphasizing the importance of self-assessment, etc. This involves tasks and activities designed and administered by the learners themselves. The diversity of tasks may cover grammar, games, written work, audio- and video-recordings, news items, translation -- you name it -- anything that interests learners will benefit them.

### 1.3 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Learning a language requires maximum use of the target language in both transactional and interactional forms of communication (Bygate, 1987). Research have suggested that learners of a second language need more opportunities than they are usually provided for both spoken and written interactions without which learners' L2 language development may actually reach a "*plateau*" proficiency level and not move beyond it (Swain & Lapkin, 1986; Swain, 1985; Swain & Wong Fillmore, 1984). In a related study on the need for more interaction in L2 learning, Long and Porter (1985) discovered that despite the gap in proficiency level of the English language between N and NNS speakers both could be found to contribute significantly towards effective comprehension of input by means of negotiation where conversational adjustments including clarifications requests, confirmation and comprehension checks were made.

In a study on communication styles of American and Japanese children conducted by Yuko and Keefer (1998), they described the nature of communication in the Internet as being low-context. A high-context communication is one in which most of the information is already in persons, while very little is coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message (Hall and Hall cited from Yuko and Keefer, 1998). The communication styles are intuitive, indirect, homogeneous and "*group-oriented*" societies like Japan and perhaps Malaysia where communication uses a lot on non-verbal clues like body motion, touching behaviour, paralanguage and physical characteristics. On the contrary, in a low-context communication pattern as inherent of the Americans "*the mass of information is vested in the explicit code*" (Hall, 1976 cited from Yuko and Keefer, 1998) and communication styles are direct, explicit, logical, black and white and attribute a higher status to verbal expression. This is also best described through Clancy's observation (cited from Rose, 1996) that:

In Japan, the ideal interaction is not one in which the speakers express their wishes and needs adequately and listeners understand and comply, but rather one in which each party understands and anticipates the needs of the other, even before anything is said. Communication can take place without, or even in spite of, actual verbalization. The main responsibility lies with the listener, who must know what the speaker means regardless of the words that are used (p.67-81)

Therefore, because the Internet world is not physical but virtual and is basically of low-context communication type interaction among participants who are of different backgrounds must be of the low-context communication pattern necessitating direct, explicit, and logical verbal expressions.

The online forum available in the Internet provides authentic, interactive communication opportunities for students that are very crucial in language acquisition. When communicating in the Internet for real purposes like asking for information, recommending a good movie or deliberating on the justification for imposition of the death penalty participants of online learning platform are actually interacting with one another and learning the English language unconsciously. Language use and language learning are social activities that occur best in situations which encourage negotiation of meaning and learner collaboration with other learners, instructors and community members. For one, the communication activities taking place in the online forum are interactively real, with real people, for real and genuine purposes. Everything that goes on inside this virtual classroom is communicative in nature (Littlewood, 1981) with elements of communication gap and authenticity (Prabhu, 1987; Long and Porter, 1985).

Anonymity, an intrinsic element of CMC, is one unique facility that helps students to experience greater freedom and confidence in expression of ideas where

problems and shyness and inferiority complex persist among L2 learners. Learning can take place smoothly without “*hindrance*”, anytime, at any place, fast, and are more flexible in terms of delivery and thought. However, as Marjonic (1999) puts it that technologically computer-mediated means of learning does not aim to replace verbal face-to-face oral interaction nor does it allow students to “*hide*” behind their computers in the collaborative process but rather supports various active learning activities that have the potential to improve problem solving, critical thinking and communication skills of all students.

#### **1.4 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH**

This study aims to investigate the usage of an online conferencing among engineering undergraduates in promoting use of the English language. It also aims to identify how participants learn and socialize when interacting in a virtual learning platform like Nicenet.

#### **1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research aims to address the following questions:

- How would participants use the English language in an online forum for communication and learn from each other?
- How would learning and socializing take place in an online forum such as Nicenet?
- In what way does the use of an online forum manifest the notions of authenticity and autonomy?



## 1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implementation of this study has been limited by several elements. Firstly, among the many CMC tools available in the Internet (e.g. WebCity, Blackboard, Firstclass), this study has been limited to the use of only one virtual online forum which is Nicenet. This is an asynchronous kind of tool that best served the purpose of this study.

Secondly, only eleven students were involved in this study. Because of the small number of samples and the need for in-depth study the qualitative approach has been adopted.

The full scale data collection activity involving face-to-face (F2F) interaction with participants or participant observation technique was only confined to a period of fifteen weeks equal to the number of academic weeks. Beyond that period, whereby the researcher was unable to make direct F2F contact since class had ended for the semester, data collection was only made via content analysis and informal conversation with the participants. In all, the total duration of the study involved a number of twenty two weeks.

Despite the successful collection of significant amount of data in the form of postings participation on the part of the general population of the students had been limited by the lack of computer facility in KUiTTHO. As such they had to rely on paid computer facility provided by privately run cyber cafes in and around the campus. Otherwise, the amount of postings hence data accumulated would have been higher.

## **1.7 IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

The importance of this study can be justified on the basis of assisting Malaysia achieve her vision and status of a developed nation by the year 2020. Among the main objectives of Vision 2020 (Multimedia Super Corridor, 2004) is to produce a large pool of highly qualified k-workers who are not only competent in their respective professional skills but generic including communication as well.

In order to achieve such goals it is thus crucial that Malaysians receive the necessary trainings including mastery of the soft skills specifically in communication. Despite the availability of a wide range of conventional or traditional techniques and tools for the purpose they are, nevertheless, insufficient or ineffective to meet communication needs of the new era whereby much of the daily workplace operations adopt the use of sophisticated Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) tools. Under the Smart School Flagship the students are trained to be knowledgeable and skillful at using highly sophisticated ICT technology and contribute to the pool of technologically-illiterate thinking workforce. This requires a self-assessed and self-directed kind of learning but with the help of up-to-date ICT tools.

It is with this in mind that continuous and intensive efforts needed to be taken towards equipping our future k-workers with the necessary language skills and one of them through the use of an online learning platform that shall be greatly discussed about in the proceeding chapters. Hopefully, the outcome of this study can provide some new insights into how language learning of the English language can be complemented by the use of CMC tools.

## **1.8 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This study focuses on students' use of a CMC tool in their everyday interaction; both formally and informally; inside the virtual forum and outside in real world; academically and for social purposes. It tries to highlight the prominence and effectiveness of using a kind of CMC tool that is very user-friendly for use towards getting students to use the target language in their everyday setting both extensively and effectively.

The fact that engineering undergraduates were chosen as samples for this study signifies the importance of effective communication skills in the English language among future professionals in related engineering profession. In addition, the fact that the samples chosen comprise of former polytechnic students who had working experience in their related engineering discipline was crucial since they would already have the required level of English necessary for smooth flow of the study. Simply, it means the students would have the minimum level of language for use when participating in the study both in F2F and virtual settings. Otherwsie, the study would have been a futile effort for lack of language among the students.

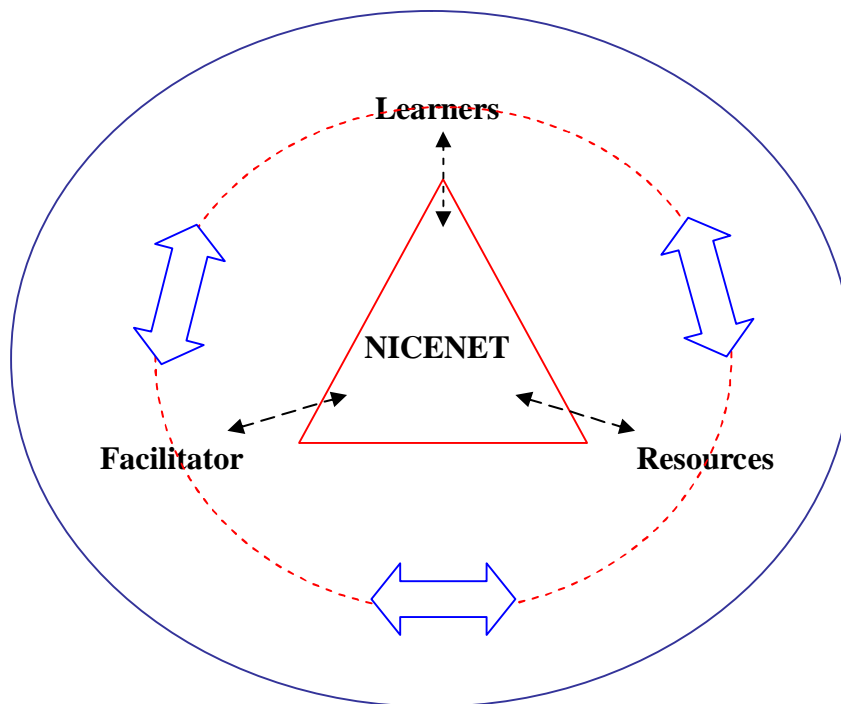
As regards the English language, the scope is more on use rather than grammatical accuracy. Nevertheless, this study highlights several aspects as regards language proficiency; language form and paragraph development. These are discussed in Chapter Four under the heading Nicenet Language.

## 1.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This section discusses the framework for the CMC environment in this research. This framework maintains that active interaction can also take place effectively in a learning environment supported by the use of a user-friendly ICT tool added with real life issues mooted for purposes of daily communication inside and beyond the virtual learning environments.

### a) The System Environment

The main components identified as crucial elements to the CMC-based environment and that make up the framework of this study are the learners, resources, and facilitator all converging towards a central point provided by Nicenet, the CMC tool used in this study, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.



**Fig. 1: Framework of the Study**

Central to the whole setting of the study is Nicenet, the CMC tool used in this study. Positioned in a triangular box, it is flanked by three main components of the CMC-based learning environment; *learners*, *facilitators* and *resources*. Each of these three components is actually linked with each other within the virtual learning platform in the triangular box of Nicenet as represented by the short dashed arrows. These three components are also linked with each other on the outside of the virtual setting as shown by the dotted inner circle. Thus, multiple-way interaction takes place both within and beyond the virtual learning platforms.

Interaction or CMC takes place within and around an electronic system environment provided by the ICT tool used in this study. In this study the scope and nature of interaction is defined by the purpose of participation and simple user-friendliness of the ICT tool. By simple definition, interaction means having the ability to use language appropriately in order to satisfy particular demands (Bygate, 1987). It entails “*controlling*” one’s own language and having to make one’s own choice such as what to say, how to say it and whether or not to develop it in accordance with one’s intentions, while maintaining the desired relations with others. The notion of wrong or right is not necessarily based on grammatical accuracy but depends on how successfully the outcome or intentions have been achieved as a result of the interaction.

## **b) The Learners**

The learners comprise of KUiTTHO undergraduates pursuing for a bachelor degree in specific engineering disciplines; civil, mechanical and electrical. Learning the English language at university level forms part of the requirements of their undergraduate study at KUiTTHO. All of these learners are those whom the researcher taught throughout the duration of the study and have close casual contact with from beyond that period until the end of this study. These students are based at the main campus though participation in the CMC interaction need not necessarily take place only from inside and within the campus ground but also beyond the physical locality of the university via home and cyber cafe terminals. In the model, Figure 1, the learners play

the most significant role and it is they themselves and for them that the other components function within the whole setting of the learning environment as embodied by the circle.

When designing the framework for this study the researcher has the constructivist point of view in mind as regards learning over the Internet. Constructivism is a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Each of us generates our own "rules" and "mental models," which we use to make sense of our experiences. Learning, therefore, is simply the process of adjusting our mental models to accommodate new experiences. According to Bruner (2001):

A major theme in the theoretical framework of Bruner about theory of constructivism is that learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge.

The purpose of learning is for an individual to construct his or her own meaning, not just memorize the "*right*" answers and regurgitate someone else's meaning. This implies that the theory of constructivism stresses on active learning where the students' role is more important compared to those of the teachers'. Students need to gain new knowledge based upon their current or past knowledge. Instructors should try their best to encourage their students in finding new principles on their own effort. In order to achieve the objective, both the instructors and students must have an active dialogue. When delivering the learning material to the students, it must always base on the current knowledge and understandings of the students. Since learning is a search for meaning it must, therefore start with the issues around which students are actively trying to construct meaning.

Bruner (2001) listed down four major aspects of the theory:

1. Learners themselves must have a predisposition toward learning.
2. The ways in which a body of knowledge can be structured for the easiness of the students in understanding it.
3. Presenting the material in proper or effective ways
4. Placing of rewards or punishment

We can conclude that instructors should encourage students in gaining knowledge on their own effort. However, the instructor's role is also crucial and indispensable. They must encourage students by using a structured teaching strategy such as listed above. Good ways of delivering knowledge will have the effects of simplifying, generating of new propositions and increasing the manipulation of information. According to Glasersfeld (1992) and Murphy (1997), the role of the lecturer is not only delivering the teaching material and knowledge to the students. They should ensure that students have opportunities and incentives to build up the knowledge gained in the class.

As a conclusion we can say that whatever one lecturer wants or intends to teach must never be presented as the only possible knowledge. Students must be given their own chances in gaining more knowledge on their own. With the realization of social construction of knowledge, it is strongly suggested that methods such as discussion and collaboration in gaining more knowledge should be intensified. From here, we can safely say that student's role should be stressed more as compared to those of the instructors'. However, language instructors should also ensure that students have the opportunity in gaining more knowledge on their own effort and one best way of doing that is by means of CMC-based approach.

**c) Resources**

They comprise of input naturally available and extracted from outside the virtual learning platform as well as from those submitted inside the platform to be brought up for further deliberations both inside and outside the virtual setting. These are actually the triggers from which interaction via the learning platform has been made possible. In this study, the resources comprise of *media*, *personal experience* and *surroundings*.

From the media, learners read and extracted certain interesting things that catch their attention to be brought into class and the virtual learning platform for discussion. Some of these were voluntarily done by the learners themselves while some at the request of the language instructor prior to class lesson. Using information from the media both in printed (newspaper articles, magazines) and digital forms (movies, documentary) is very much encouraged since the materials are current and authentic to the learning needs of the learners.

Using personal experience also brings out another authentic form of learning materials that learners can use for learning purposes. It is only natural for humans to want to share their experiences as regards certain issues in daily life. This ranges from personal to matters of common interest that the learners feel others would like to know about it. Learners have a lot of relevant interestingly “sweet and sour” experiences that are worth sharing with others. These would relate to their previous experiences prior to coming to university, current daily life happenings as university undergraduates as well as personal experiences of others whom they like to relate about.

The surrounding elements bring about good materials that can be used for learning purposes among ESL students. They are readily and freely available and provide quick and easy to use materials. Each individual among us is greatly influenced



by the surroundings with live in. The things that happen around and as a result of the learners within their living habitat have significant impact on their lives and for many these they would like others to share. The fact that learners are able to “express” their thoughts and feelings as regards certain matters gives them a soothing effect knowing that there are others who understand them and that they are not alone in this world having to go through such experiences in life.

It is evident that the huge amount of “natural” resources available at the disposal of the learners is generated for and by both the virtual and real world settings. The fact that outside real world matters are brought into the virtual learning platform to be discussed among members makes the learning process more meaningful and authentic. For most of them, these resources are in fact genuine that revolves around the daily lives of the learners both as students and members of the larger community.

**d) Facilitator**

The facilitator in a CMC environment would be the language instructor. The main roles of the facilitator would be to create opportunities for interactive communication activities throughout the duration of the learning process. These may be done by initiating new topics of discussion both inside and outside the virtual environment and responding to the postings submitted by students inside the virtual environment. It is also crucial for the facilitator to ensure continuous and regular participation inside the virtual environment towards making the platform a lively enriched arena for CMC-based interaction. The facilitator should encourage students in gaining knowledge on their own effort. However, instructors’ role is also important. They must encourage students by using a structured teaching strategy such as listed above. In order to teach well, instructors must also understand the mental models that students use to perceive the world and the assumptions they make to support those models.

Good ways of delivering knowledge will have the effects of simplifying, generation of new propositions and increasing the manipulation of information. According to Glaserfeld (1992) and Murphy (1997), the role of the instructor is not only delivering the teaching material and knowledge to the students. They should ensure that students have opportunities and incentives to build up the knowledge gained in the class. From the point of constructivism, meaning requires understanding **wholes** as well as parts. And parts must be understood in the context of wholes. Therefore, when delivering their lessons the focus should be on primary concepts, not isolated facts. The learning context in the form of threads of discussion as intrinsic of the online learning platform used in this study provides the necessary wholeness needed for the purpose.

As a conclusion we can say that from the constructivist perspective, whatever one lecturer wants or intends to teach must never be presented as the only possible knowledge. Students must be given their own chances in gaining more knowledge on their own. With the realization of social construction of knowledge, constructivist suggests methods such as discussion and collaboration in gaining more knowledge. From here, we can say that the Theory of Constructivism stresses more on students' role compared to those of instructors'. This will ensure students get the opportunity in gaining more knowledge on their own effort.

#### e) **Collaborative Learning**

Another crucial component of the online learning via asynchronous platform such as Nicenet is collaboration. Collaboration deals with cooperative learning among learners, lecturers and the resources. Vygotsky (1962 cited from Warschauer, 1997) stressed that collaborative learning (CL), either among students or between students and a teacher, was essential for assisting students in advancing through their zone of proximal development – in other words through the gap between what they could accomplish by themselves and what they could accomplish in cooperation with others.

In recent years, several main perspectives have developed on how CL is accomplished. Using Modeling Interpretation (Wertsch & Bivens, 1992 cited from Warschauer, 1997), “intermental functioning is viewed primarily in terms of how it can provide a model for tutees’ individual mental processes”. In one well-known study based on this interpretation, a teacher modelled for students an approach to leading a discussion on readings based on asking interpretive questions, which the students then successfully implemented in their own small groups (Palinscar & Brown, 1994 cited from Warschauer, 1997). However, according to Wertsch & Bivens (1992 cited from Warschauer, 1997) the model does “involve participation in dialogic interaction”. Nevertheless, “the tendency to view the process involved in terms of modelling means that the tutee often continues to be viewed as a passive recipient”

Another way of understanding CL in language learning better is looking at the text mediational interpretation of Vygotsky (Wertsch & Bivens, 1992 cited from Warschauer, 1997). This interpretation deemphasizes the tutor-tutee concept inherent in the modeling view, and instead focuses on how “all participants in intermental functioning are actively engaged in shaping this functioning”. Texts then are not seen as links for conveying information, but rather as “thinking devices” used to collaboratively generate new meanings (Lotman, 1988 cited from Warschauer, 1997). This model has been well-developed by educators such as Bayer (Bayer, 1990 cited from Warschauer, 1997) and Wells (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992 cited from Warschauer, 1997). Bayer’s model collaborative apprenticeship learning emphasizes the use of expressive talk, expressive writing, peer collaboration, and meaningful problem-solving tasks. The teacher assists, not as a model but prior knowledge”, use language as a tool for learning”, and develop “language and thinking competencies”. Her model bears some similarity to whole language approaches to education.

Wells (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992 cited from Warschauer, 1997) describes learning as semiotic apprenticeship based on the creation of a collaborative community of practice. He combines a systematic linguistic approach of Halliday (1978 cited from Warschauer, 1997) with the semiotic mediation concept of Vygotsky in order to analyze

how learners construct knowledge together and “attain literate thinking through talk” (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). Wells examines in particular how learners talk and write about texts. As Wells (Wells and Chang-Wells, 1992) points out, “by making a record of text of thought available for reflection, and, if necessary, revision, a written text serves as a ‘cognitive amplifier’ (Bruner, 1972 cited from Warschauer, 1997), allowing the reader to bootstrap his or won thinking in a more powerful manner than is normally possible in speech”. According to Wells, though, this opportunity for cognitive amplification is too often missed in school, as texts are engaged primarily in a performative mode engaged in an epistemic mode, in other words, treated “not as a representation of meaning that is already decided, given, and self-evident, but as a tentative and provisional attempt on the part of the writer to capture his or her current understanding ... so that it may provike further attempts at understanding as the writer or the reader dialogues with the text in order to interpret its meaning”. When students attempt that interpretation by writing down their responses, they can “capture those insights and perceived connections so that they can be returned to, critically examined, reconsidered, and perhaps made the basis for the construction of a further sustained text of one’s own” (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992 cited from Warschauer, 1997).

In conclusion, by bridging together the concepts of expression, interaction, reflection, problem-solving, critical thinking, and literacy, and seeing how these concepts are tied together through various uses of talk, text, nquiry, and collaboration in the classroom, the text-mediational view of Vygotsky provides an extremely useful framework for understanding CL in the language classroom.

## **1.10 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

The following are definitions of some of the more widely used terms and specific to this study:

- a) *Online Forum* – refers to a virtual venue in the Internet for use in communication. In this respect the online forum is the chosen portal used by the participants for educational purposes. This portal is freely available in the Internet at [www.nicenet.org](http://www.nicenet.org)
- b) *Motivated* – refers to act of wanting to do something for a purpose. In this respect it relates to the students wanting to use the English language in daily communication
- b) *Promote* – refers to the task of encouraging more frequent use of the English language in daily interaction both in and outside the virtual online forum.
- c) *Use and Usage* – refer to frequency of use of the English language in daily interaction both in formal and informal class settings. This includes the reading and writing tasks involved throughout the students’ participation in the virtual platform.
- d) *English language* – refers to the commonly used English language in Malaysia for daily interaction both in formal and informal settings
- e) *Engineering undergraduates* – refer to students pursuing for a bachelor’s degree in any one of the engineering courses offered at KUiTTTHO. In this particular respect they are former polytechnic students in their 1<sup>st</sup> year of study at KUiTTTHO majoring in civil, electrical and mechanical engineering disciplines.

This chapter has thus explained about the problems identified, the aims of the study, research questions, definition of terms, importance, scope and limitations of the study. It has also listed down the definition of terms used throughout and a framework of the study is also provided. The following chapter shall discuss the necessary literature review of CMC and its related effects and implications upon usage of the English language among ESL learners.

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