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SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS
IN ENGLISH THROUGH VIRTUAL
OR SIMULATED ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Virtual world or environment such as MOO (MUD- Multi-User Domain, Object Oriented) is one of the predominantly text-based synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools. Since early 1990s, MOO has generated much interest among second language researchers. However, to date, not many studies have focused on the impact of using MOO on face-to-face communication skills. For the purpose of this research, in UTM, a full-fledged virtual university called *UniTekMOO*, was developed and regularly updated to benefit the students in their English communication skills and specific areas of study. With the construction of the virtual campus of *UnitekMOO*, this study began investigating on the effects of MOO on learners' communication skills and on their attitudes towards English language learning. Data were gathered through participant observation (done virtually), classroom observation, questionnaire and online interview. Content and conversational analysis were also done on the MOO chatlogs. Through interviews and questionnaires, learners believed that their interaction experiences within the MOO had improved their communication skills. In particular, more than half of the students felt that their interactions within the MOO environment have i) boosted their interest in learning English, ii) helped improve their spelling, and iii) increased their confidence in face-to-face interactions in English. We would recommend that the *UnitekMOO* be made available to students to practice using the target language as activities to complement their regular English proficiency classes.

ABSTRAK

Persekitaran Maya seperti Dimensi-berbilang-pengguna Berorientasikan Objek (MOO) merupakan sebuah aplikasi segerak Komunikasi Berantaraan Komputer (CMC) yang berasaskan teks untuk pembelajaran dan penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris. Sejak 1990-an, MOO telah menjana minat yang tinggi di kalangan penyelidik bahasa kedua sejak sedekad yang lalu. Walaubagaimanapun, hanya sedikit sahaja dari kajian mereka memfokus kepada kesan penggunaan MOO terhadap komunikasi oral. Untuk tujuan kajian ini, situasi simulasi kampus UTM, yang dinamakan *UniTekMOO* telah dibangunkan dan sering dikemaskinikan untuk dimanfaatkan oleh pelajar dalam penguasaan kemahiran komunikasi di dalam Bahasa Inggeris serta bidang pengkhususan mereka. Dengan pembangunan universiti maya *UniTekMOO*, kajian ini mula mengkaji kesan-kesan MOO terhadap kemahiran komunikasi pelajar dan terhadap sikap mereka dalam mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris. Data dikumpul melalui “participant observation” (dilakukan secara maya), pemerhatian di dalam kelas, soal selidik dan temubual secara maya. Analisis konten dan analisis perbualan telah digunakan untuk menganalisa log perbualan MOO. Melalui temubual dan soal selidik, pelajar amat konfiden bahawa pengalaman berinteraksi di dalam MOO telah meningkatkan kemahiran komunikasi mereka di dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Secara terperinci, lebih separuh daripada pelajar merasakan bahawa pengalaman berinteraksi di dalam MOO telah i) menaikkan minat mereka untuk mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris, ii) meningkatkan kemahiran mengeja, dan iii) meningkatkan keyakinan mereka untuk bertutur dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Kami mencadangkan bahawa *UniTekMOO* diwujudkan untuk i) kegunaan pelajar untuk berlatih menggunakan bahasa sasaran, iaitu Bahasa Inggeris, dan ii) sebagai aktiviti tambahan bagi kelas-kelas kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris mereka di UTM.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This is a preliminary qualitative study that aims to describe students' reactions towards the MOO (Multi-dimension Object Oriented) virtual environment, which is one of several synchronous CMC tools available to language educators today. In general, the study aims to elicit information on whether the use of MOO environment among students can benefit their learning of the English language in general, and their use of the target language to socially communicate with others.

In particular, the study also aims to investigate whether the use of MOO can encourage students, especially those with limited proficiency in the English language, to interact more in the language and whether these interaction experiences have positively or negatively influenced their attitudes towards learning and producing English.

This chapter starts with the background of the study where the human conditions or circumstances which established the need for the study are discussed. A brief discussion of key theoretical approaches, findings and conclusions reported in earlier related studies are also mentioned to provide background framework to the readers. This is followed by the statement of the problem where the specific research need, which provide impetus for the study, is defined and where the central question of the research is formulated to address this need. Following this, the purpose of the study and the research questions formulated are indicated. Finally, the significance of the study is discussed.

1.2 Background of the Study

In order to truly become a world-class university, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) must be able to produce world-class graduates who are not only able to serve Malaysia and the Malaysian society in the future, but also other nations and other societies as well. Thus, UTM graduates must not only be proficient in their respective fields of study but they must also possess communication skills which could be used in the global context. They must possess sufficient proficiency in the English language to successfully interact with their peers and other professionals, both locally and globally.

Our teaching experience in UTM has led us to believe that many UTM students, especially the Malays, do not normally interact in the English language. In an institution where the Malay language is the dominant language of instruction, and where the majority of the students are Malays, the use of the Malay language as the preferred language of communication is understandable. However, this lack of exposure to communicating in the English language means that students will be less valuable in the job market when they graduate. The current business scenario both in Malaysia and abroad places great importance on the competence to communicate and interact in English because many local and most international businesses today use English as the preferred language for business communication.

UTM students' lack of English interaction skills makes them afraid to use English as a communication tool. Many students can understand English quite well but when it comes to speaking in English, many will be found wanting. They are reluctant to use English in their everyday communication with fellow students or with lecturers because of several reasons. Among those are lack of confidence, the fear of being ridiculed by friends, and non-conducive surroundings.

Thus, it is our belief that if we can provide a tool which does not intimidate the students, fun and can be made readily available anytime, perhaps their English communication skills can be enhanced - a tool which could do all these falls in the realm of CALL, more specifically, a CMC tool. This is based on findings and conclusions reported in earlier related studies.

Students' perception towards asynchronous CMC was positive. CMC provided a worthwhile experience to the learners, hence the level of commitment towards their own learning was high (Ghazali, 1999). Similarly, Dulay and Burt (1977) mentioned that reducing the 'socioaffective' filter and consecutively allowing more input to get to the learners will make them more open to learning English. This is in parallel with the capacity of the internet as having the anxiety reducing effect on the students (Schwartz, 1995). Low anxiety level increased the level of learning. CMC also served as a medium of communication. Wan Fara Wan Mansor (1998) mentioned that real-time synchronous CMC such as IRC, Talk, and MOO/MUD is currently used expansively all over the world, as well as making its way into the field of English language teaching. Accordingly, computers have a principal role to provide alternative contexts for social interaction to take place by facilitating the access to currently existing discourse communities as well as the creation of new discourse communities (Kern and Warschauer, 2000).

From the earlier studies as shown above, CMC has great potentials for language learning through the means of interaction between the learners in a low anxiety environment due to user anonymity. This will allow for constructive and entertaining environment featured especially in MOO to give students the benefit of having social experience in helping them to learn English as their second language.

Thus, we believe that a synchronous CMC tool such as MOO can be used as a medium for the enhancement of English communication skills among UTM students.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

UTM graduates must not only be proficient in their own fields of study but they must also possess communication skills which could be used globally. Therefore, they must be proficient enough in the English language in order to successfully interact with others both in the local and the global settings.

The problem remains that UTM students, under 'normal' circumstances, do not have sufficient motivation nor drive to interact in English. This might result in UTM students not achieving 'world class' quality in their communication skills. Thus, there is a need

for a tool or medium which can be utilized by UTM students to enhance their English communication skills. The tool or medium itself must not be intimidating to students and the tool or medium should promote a positive attitude among the students towards the learning of English in general.

Apart from that, the tool or medium should encourage the students to produce output in the English language and should sufficiently motivate the students to continue using it and thus further develop their interaction skills in English.

Accordingly, this study has investigated the feasibility of the MOO (the virtual environment) as a proposed tool to provide the medium to simulate face-to-face interaction, i.e. using the target language for interaction with other students.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was firstly to find out whether the use of a virtual environment (MOO) as a medium can promote communication skills in English, especially among limited proficiency learners. Secondly, the study aimed to find out whether the interaction experiences of the students within this virtual environment have encouraged them to communicate in English in real life. Finally, the study aimed to find out whether these experiences have positively or negatively influenced their attitudes towards learning and producing English.

1.5 Research Questions

This qualitative study aims to answer 2 specific questions listed below:

1. In what way does the use of virtual environment promote/inhibit communication skills in English among low proficiency learners?
2. In what way does the learners' interaction experience within the virtual environment
 - a. promote English language learning?

- b. influence their perspective/attitude towards learning and producing the target language?

It is hoped that the answers to these questions will help English language educators, especially the English lecturers in UTM to find a better way to promote the use of English communication skills among students. This is especially important to UTM if it were to succeed in producing technology-based graduates who are not only competent and knowledgeable in their various fields of study but who are also able to demonstrate this competence globally through the use of good English communication skills.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study can provide a conducive environment for UTM students to practice the English language with fellow students and lecturers, thus promoting competency in English communication skills.

The study is important for the identification of UTM students' social network and interests in order for educators to incorporate these features in their teaching to increase students' motivation in learning.

Accordingly, the study can foster an active virtual community of English language 'fun' learners among UTM students, as well as fostering spin-offs into other areas of learning such as ESP, where students interact with the MOO environment to enhance their knowledge and skills in their respective fields of study.

Finally, with the creation of the MOO, specifically UniTekMOO, this will provide opportunities for the lecturers and students to establish healthy and professional relationships. Furthermore, this will pave the way for distance education where lecturers have the ability to virtually communicate with their students from wherever they are with ease.

1.7 Scope of the study

This study was carried out among a group of 1st year UTM Mechanical Engineering students doing English for Academic Communication course. 12 students were selected from one of UHB English proficiency classes. We had identified about 30 students who were in the range of low to intermediate English proficiency based on their SPM English results. From this 30, volunteers were solicited. Out of the 30, only 12 volunteered to be included in the study. The research's focus was on the use of communication skills within the MOO environment among low proficiency learners.

1.8 Definition of Terms

There are several distinct terms used in this study. They are MOO, Virtual Environment, Communication Skills, and Interaction.

1.8.1 MOO

MOO stands for Multi-user domain, Object-Oriented – networked, and predominantly text based virtual environment and is a virtual 'world' where users can move around and 'talk' via the keyboard to the people they meet, which is just like a chat room (Meloni, 1998).

However, the difference between MOO and a normal chat room is that when we take away the typists, the created virtual world would still remain, allowing new users to enter and interact at any time, with the condition that the server is operational (Crystal, 2001). Teeler and Gray (2000) expounded this further by stating that MOO is different from a chat program as the sense of community and permanence is prevalent in a MOO.

1.8.2 Virtual Environment

Virtual environment can be generally defined as “a computer generated world with which the user can interact.” (Kooper, 1993). Virtual environments can be as elaborate as 3D images users can interact with using elaborate, high-tech equipment or as simple as a text-based virtual world where characters such as monsters, universities, medieval heroes and robots can co-exist side by side. In the context of this research, the virtual environment, UniTekMOO, is predominantly text-based.

1.8.3 Communication Skills

Communication can be defined as a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviors. Skill is defined as a learned power of doing something competently and something that is a developed aptitude or ability.

Poor communication skills are bound to cause problems in maintaining interactions. In order for learners to have good communication skills, they need to involve themselves in social interactions. In this study, MOO acted as the medium for interaction to take place among language learners. Learners have to learn to initiate and respond to stimuli, take verbal turns, sustain social contact, and negotiate conflicts (Craig-Unkefer and Kaiser, 2002).

Apart from that, Canale and Swain (1980) stressed on the communicative competence as essential to the teaching of communication skills in English, namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. These competencies play crucial roles in encouraging learners to exploit their own second language ability in order to participate in actual communication situations.

1.8.4 Interaction

In this study, interaction can be defined as human to human conversation between two or more people. Interaction can take place orally such as in the face-to-face conversation between two people or it can also be in the written medium, as in the case with the 'conversation' of two or more people in the MOO environment.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This second chapter discusses important theoretical perspectives influencing this study, and also introduces other studies related to it. An overview of CALL and its components will be discussed in brief followed by a discussion on MOO. Finally, two key views to language learning, the interactionist view and the socio-cognitive view are discussed.

2.2 An Overview of CALL

In approaching the focus of study, which was investigating the use of a text based Virtual Environment (MOO) to promote communication skills in English, several major theoretical perspectives and approaches, and methods to language acquisition and learning were considered. Among them are Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL) and its off springs and spin offs such as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Network Based Language Teaching (NBLT), and Virtual Environment (VE). Benefits of employing MOO were also discussed under the subset of VE. Next, the theories and approaches of interactionism and sociocognitism were also discussed. Following this, prior research and conclusions on the MOO environment were also taken into consideration. The diagram below summarises the theoretical perspectives and approaches considered in this study.

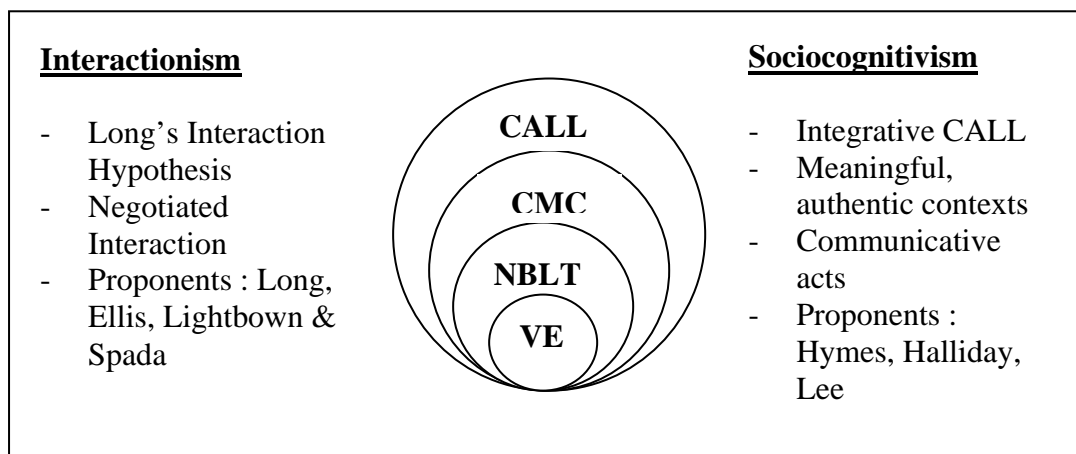


Figure 2.1: Theoretical Perspectives and Approaches to this study

2.3 CMC in relation to CALL

Kern and Warschauer (2000) gave a brief introduction of how CALL model functions:

1. Computer as stimulus in communicative activities: This does not require students to discover the right answer, but rather focused on stimulating students, providing them with the platform to engage in discussion, writing, or critical thinking.
2. Computer as tool: Computer is not inclined to provide any language materials. However it empowers the learner to use the language.
3. Computer-as-tutor is one of the early CALL programs, which consist of tutorials, drills and language testing instruments. It is not really sophisticated because it only accepts one response per item.

CALL programs like the above basically leaned towards the cognitive views of language learning for example; problem-solving and hypothesis testing as they allowed learners to utilize their existing knowledge to develop new understandings because the computer itself provided the tools and resources to the learner and it is up to the learner to do something with it in a simulated environment (Kern and Warschauer, 2000).

The last and most recent CALL development was the integrative CALL. This development of CALL took on the socio-cognitive view emphasizing on real language

use in a meaningful and authentic context as well as integrating various skills of language learning (listening, speaking, writing and reading), thus incorporating technology fully into language teaching as multi-networked computers can provide a range of informational and communicative opportunities for students (Lee, 2000).

2.4 NBLT in relation to CALL and CMC

NBLT or Network-Based Language Teaching is language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). CALL has traditionally been associated with self-contained, programmed applications such as tutorials, drills, simulations, instructional games, tests, and so on. Accordingly, due to the development of computer networking, NBLT represents a new and different side of CALL, where human-to-human communication is the focus (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

The effectiveness of NBLT requires technical knowledge as well as reflective and innovative attitude that focused the learning process on the student from the teacher (Vera Queiroz, 2003). Strambi and Bouvet (2003) in their study on the effectiveness of NBLT, stated that if utilized carefully, NBLT provide the following benefits.

1. Provides negotiation of meaning similar to face-to-face interaction and increases effectiveness of meaningful interaction, which is the main feature of CMC.
2. Allows learners to produce and reflect complex and accurate instances of language use, albeit in written form.
3. Provides a non-threatening learning environment which will enhance task authenticity and the exchange of information.
4. Facilitates grammar-based activities (as important as meaning-based activities in SLA).
5. Provides automatic and immediate feedback as a source of negative evidence. This can be just a simple explanation yet the learners may be able to identify the problematic aspect of their interlanguage.

2.5 Synchronous versus Asynchronous Interaction

Conversational interaction differs significantly from the normal oral communication whereby learners talk to each other face-to-face. Computer-mediated communication is basically conversations which tend to be written and at a distance whereby the learners themselves are not bodily present. CMC is inclusive of both synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction.

Crystal (2001) in his paper on “The Language and the Internet” stated two main ways of interacting online that is through synchronous and asynchronous interaction. The table below presents the differences between the two modes in detail:

Table 2.1: The two main ways of interacting online

Asynchronous	Synchronous
<p>Groups are formed based on particular interest in subject matter.</p> <p>The members post their contribution to the group in which will be saved in files for future reading and the system will make these available to all the addresses it holds or other network of addresses.</p> <p>The management is under the role-labels: list-owner, editor, host, postmaster, maintainer/moderator.</p> <p>Teachers and students gain equal participation.</p> <p>Reserved students could find opportunity to make their voice heard and express something novel and stimulating.</p> <p>Classroom conference facilitates exchanges of ideas among a population at the same educational level.</p>	<p>It concerns the electronic interactions that are taking place in real time.</p> <p>Participation overlaps, messages are typically short, rapidly distributed (lag permitting), coming from variety of sources (any number of people online at once). Every exchange is interrupted by messages from the other, destroying the conventional understanding of adjacency pairs and silence is viewed as ambiguous (deliberate with-holding, temporary inattention, physical absence without signing off).</p> <p>Nick practice: the core principle is that nicknames are not owned and nick clashes are not permitted and nick is the electronic identity saying who they are, inviting others to talk to them and ensuring they are recognized as being the same person each time they log on.</p> <p>Sources of visual distinctiveness: use of smileys, rebus-like abbreviations, colloquial elisions (r, u, n), emotional noises (hehehe),</p>

Peer-group factor causes the feeling of equality, so, the language will serve as the means to establish and maintain group membership and identity.	fillers and perverse spellings (outa, c ya), ignored capitalization, omission of verb.
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One learning tool using the synchronous CMC framework is MOO, a predominantly text-based Virtual Environment on a network. In this synchronous CMC, learners can look for opinions to react to. Rather than looking for facts, learners can learn about real life interaction in MOO that offers immense social values. Learners are able to participate anonymously in a dynamic, transient, experimental and unpredictable world despite the linguistic confusion and incoherence (Crystal, 2001).

“Virtual worlds have great effect on the language of chatgroups which allows spontaneous, creative and remarkable linguistic versatility within ordinary people who have learnt to use their innate ability to accommodate to new linguistic situation and norms.”

(Crystal, 2001)

Therefore, MOO as a synchronous form of computer-mediated communication could provide the learners with a real time environment for learners to interact and learn the language simultaneously. The learners will be able to learn how to communicate and socialize in this virtual world with ease due to the user anonymity (nick practice), one of the features of a synchronous CMC.

2.6 Virtual Environment (MOO)

Virtual environment is defined as an experience whereby a person is surrounded by a three dimensional computer-generated representation in effect and not in real life, and is able to move around in the virtual world and see it from different angles, reach into it,

grab it, and reshape it (Rheingold, 1991). Through this virtual reality, learners are able to learn the target language, English, as well as to understand others better (Hee, 2002).

In this study, UniTekMOO is a virtual world where learners can enter and experience a whole new reality of finding friends and lecturers to meet and socialize with and gradually familiarizing themselves to the habit of using English for communication during their visit in the virtual world. This skill could then be transferred and adapted for use in the real world.

Apart from the above, virtual environments encourage learners to have diverse ways of thinking, for example solving problems. This virtual environment also allows the users to control and interact directly with objects within the virtual world through text-based interaction.

Carton (1995) mentioned that “virtual worlds are some of the most fascinating results of combining the power of the internet with human creativity ... Our minds are much better at visualization than computers are.”

Carton (1995) categorised MOO as a virtual world and explains its characteristics and functions below:

“One of the more recently developed types of virtual worlds, MOO was first created by Pavel Curtis at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. MOOs use a sophisticated programming language that allow people on the MOO to create their own objects and locations. MOOs are almost exclusively social worlds with very little emphasis on game-playing. Some MOOs are being used as teaching and conferencing environments.”

2.6.1 Advantages of MOO

MOO as a learning environment is claimed to have many advantages and benefits: Shield, Weininger and Davies (1999) reported that MOO can empower learners by

allowing them to make contributions with the knowledge that they would not be interrupted. This will then lead to increased confidence both socially and in using English language. They also mention that shy learners are able to contribute to discussions on an equal footing with their more extrovert peers due to its relative anonymity, and even if no users are online, learners can interact with the environment.

Schwienhorst (1997b) said that the MOO acts as a powerful medium to improve writing skills and oral proficiency, metalinguistic, as well as learning awareness that are crucial to the development of learner autonomy to cater for the learner-centered approach in language learning.

Next, Schwienhorst (1998) also stated that virtual reality such as MOO provides an alternative to the formal learning environment of the institutionalized classroom. It is a third place that is neither work nor home, neither the target language culture nor our native speaker community.

We need to use the virtual environment because we cannot and do not want to be left behind in the development of the latest modern technology which is making waves in the educational world. Oldenberg (1989) mentioned that MOO has to be used in virtual reality due to” ...the importance of third places which exist on neutral ground and level the guests to that of a social equality. Conversation is the primary activity and major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality” (p 23).

Again, Schwienhorst stated that:

“For language learning, multi-user VR can support firstly the development of the autonomous language user, because of the wealth of interactivity with the environment and the wealth of interaction with native speakers, and secondly the development of the autonomous language learner, because of their own production of meaningful learning material and the permanence and visibility of written medium.”

(Schwienhorst, 1998)

This implies that the learners were able to engage in meaningful interaction and consecutively improved their language proficiency.

From all the reviews on the benefits of MOO as the virtual environment for language learning, Shneiderman (1997) said that “learning is something students do, not something that is done to them.” Therefore, the learners themselves have got to be involved and be motivated to learn. Only then, the learning will become theirs or the benefits of MOO will become apparent to them.

2.6.2 Disadvantages of MOO

Turbee (1997) gave the disadvantages of using MOO as a social and communicative learning environment as:

1. Teachers are uncomfortable with loss of control over students’ behaviour.
2. Some students have emotional response, positive or negative.
3. Some students have poor keyboarding skills.

2.7 Approaches to Language Learning / Acquisition

Below is a discussion on the views to language learning and teaching which are relevant to this study. The two main views discussed are the interactionist view and the sociocognitive view.

2.7.1 The Interactionist View

One of the most important theories in SLA was the Interaction Hypothesis made by Michael H. Long in 1981. The Interaction Hypothesis stated that conditions promoting SLA among L2 learners can be enhanced by having them negotiate meaning with other speakers, native or non-native. Since then, the concept of Interaction Hypothesis and Negotiation of Meaning has been examined by other researchers. Ellis in *The Interaction*

Hypothesis: A Critical Evaluation (1991) summarised the interaction hypothesis as follows:-

1. Comprehensible input is necessary for L2 acquisition (or input hypothesis)
2. Modifications to the interactional structure of conversations which take place in the process of negotiating a communication problem help to make input comprehensible to an L2 learner.
 - a. Tasks in which there is a need for the participants to exchange information with each other promote more interactional restructuring.
 - b. A situation in which the conversational partners share a symmetrical role relationship affords more opportunities for interactional restructuring.

To sum up, the Interactionist position is the psychological learning theory which emphasized on 'how' input was made comprehensible through modified interaction that is necessary for language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2000).

Lightbown and Spada (2000) also mentioned that modified interaction which comprised of elaboration, slower speech rate, gestures or the provision of additional contextual clues, comprehension checks, clarification requests and self-repetition, allowed learners to adapt what they are saying during interaction until mutual understanding is achieved.

The Interaction Hypothesis of language learning emphasizes the importance of verbal interaction as the best vehicle to learn a language. Swain (1985) mentioned that output (verbal interaction) provides great opportunity for meaningful use of one's linguistic resources.

Hence, we can surmise that interaction in SLA have two functions according to Lightbown and Spada (2000):

1. It provides comprehensible input necessary for L2 acquisition.
2. It promotes modification to the interactional structure of conversation during the process of negotiating a communication. This would then lead to comprehensible input to the learners.

In this study, there were two models of interaction, which are;

1. The Input and Language Modification Model
2. The Social Interaction Model

2.7.1.1 The Input and Language Modification Model

According to Chapelle (1997) and Goodfellow and Lamy (1999), this is a model in which the L2 is acquired through learners' interaction in the target language because it provided opportunities for learners to:

- (a) comprehend message meaning, which is believed to be necessary for learners to acquire the L2 forms that encode the message;
- (b) produce modified output, which requires their development of specific morphology and syntax; and
- (c) attend to L2 form, which helps to develop their linguistic systems.

2.7.1.2 The Social Interaction Model

Goodfellow and Lamy (1999) stated that the social interaction model is a model whereby the interaction which exhibits the greatest equality among participants, communicative symmetry in terms of the distribution of turns and roles, and a combination of familiarity of subject matter with unpredictability, is what he calls "contingent interaction" within which there is the likelihood of the best quality learning since "the agenda is shared by all participants and educational reality may be transformed."

Eggen and Kauchak (2001) say that group interaction or discussion is an instructional strategy whereby students shared ideas with each other and also engage in higher level of thinking. Accordingly, social interaction will be able to promote higher level of thinking skills. The cooperative learning in group discussion can be used to achieve task's goal, improve learner's motivation to learn, encourage better social skills and relationships between learners from diverse background, and improve problem-solving and critical-thinking skills in learners.

2.7.1.3 Interaction and MOO

MOO is the medium where the wealth of interactivity with the environment and the wealth of interaction with other learners can take place (Schwienhorst, 1998). Hence, it is the best place for the two models of interaction mentioned above to take place, allowing learners to acquire the communicative skills that are crucial to language learning, especially skills which can adequately prepare them for successful face-to-face communications.

2.7.2 The Sociocognitive View

The sociocognitive view was proposed by Dell Hymes and M.A.K. Halliday (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). The elements of the sociocognitive view is given in Table 2.2:

Table 2.2: Elements of the sociocognitive view

Sociocognitive View
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sociocognitive view is based on social interaction and assimilation of others' speech. • It pays attention to form (genre, register, and style variation) in contexts of real language use. • The view is leaned towards the negotiation of meaning through collaborative interaction with others in creating a discourse community with authentic communicative tasks. • It involves stretches of connected discourse. • As communicative acts in which we “do things with words” • In the interaction between the interlocutors, writers and readers; the interaction is constrained by interpretive rules of the relevant discourse community.

Kern and Warschauer (2000) in explaining the use of sociocognitive view in CMC in relation to CALL have these to say:

1. The focus of interaction has shifted from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer due to the shift in both theoretical (emphasis on meaningful interaction in authentic discourse communities) and technological developments (development of computer networking, allowing the computer to be used as a vehicle for interactive human communication).
2. Computer networking in the language classroom stems from two important technological networking and social developments, which are CMC and globally linked hypertext.
3. CMC existed since 1960's and become widespread only since the late 1980's, and it allows learners with network access to communicate with other learners or speakers of the target language in either asynchronous or synchronous modes , whereby the learners share not only brief messages but also lengthy documents and facilitate collaborative reading and writing.
4. The sociocognitive paradigm and an emphasis on learning through computer networks have brought about a focus on the way that discourse and discourse communities develop during use of computer networks.
5. Learners use a variety of language functions in computer-mediated communication as they are involved in the interaction.
6. Oren (1996) refers to the importance of the social nature of MOO that can create a social environment, which may foster learning and instruction.
7. MOO allows individuals all around the world to have a simultaneous conversation, permitting one-to-one communication as well as one-to-many communication.

2.8 Promoting Communication Skills among ESL students through MOO: the Transferability of Written Skills to Oral Skills

One of the most important concerns of this study was whether MOO can help students with limited English language proficiency in their communication skills, particularly, in their face-to-face oral interaction. On the surface, there seemed to be little similarity between MOO interaction which is conducted in the written medium and face-to-face interaction, which is of course in the spoken medium. However, many researches have indicated that in MOO, although the interaction is written but the content of the interaction approximates spoken conventions rather than written conventions.

A research by Schwienhorst (1997b) mentioned that "...the MOO should be a powerful medium not only to improve writing skills, but also oral proficiency and most importantly, metalinguistic and learning awareness that are central to the development of learner autonomy". Similarly, Chun (1994) found that CMC based class discussions seemed to aid the interaction of interactive competence since learners tended to engage themselves in many types of discourse initiation. She went on to suggest that text based CMC is useful in bridging between the written and spoken skills of the learners. Added to this, Warschauer (1998) in his research, managed to provide the initial evidence that computer-mediated interaction not only includes many of the same interactional modifications that are believed to make oral negotiation beneficial, but, because they occur in a written environment, these modifications may be even more beneficial for enhancing language acquisition. These research indicated the importance of synchronous CMC, in this case, MOO, in helping learners with their face-to-face interaction skills.

Furthermore, there were also other examples which provide initial evidence that negotiations of meaning through interaction in the MOO environment can help students with their communication skills.

Pellettieri in his article on the negotiation of meaning and interaction in Network Based Communication (NBC) had this to say:

“ ... particularly promising among the various forms of NBC are those that allow for synchronous, real-time communication, the obvious advantage being that messages are typed, sent, and received instantaneously, bringing the electronic communicative exchanges from the static to the more dynamic, and thus more closely resembling oral interaction...Current research also indicates that chatting can foster the development of sociolinguistic and interactive competence. ... learners produced a wide range of discourse structures and speech acts; students greeted each other, asked and answered questions of each other, initiated topic changes, and expanded on topics.”

(Pellettieri, 2000: 59)

Kern (1995) too reported that students in electronic discussions used a wide variety of discourse structures and noted that this variety was greater in the electronic discussions than in the oral discussions.

As the synchronous NBC fosters the negotiation for meaning and form-focused interaction, and students communicating through this synchronous NBC have more time to process and monitor their own interlanguage, Pellettieri (2000) believed that NBC chatting can play a significant role in the development of grammatical competence among classroom language learners.

Negretti (1999) who studied chat sessions of non-native speakers in English using Conversational Analysis methods placed her focus on the differences between chatting and face-to-face interaction. Even though oral proficiency was not the object of her study, she claimed that her participants improved their oral proficiency after two months of chat activities.

Another benefit of MOO is that it can help promote better communication skills among learners by providing a more relaxed and informal environment for them to learn which could reduce their anxiety in learning, and increase their motivation to learn.

Schwienhorst (1997a), for example, stated that “VR provides an alternative to the formal environment of the institutionalized classroom, a third place that is neither work nor home,

or in language learning terms, neither the target language culture nor our native speaker community”.

In addition, MOO is able to empower the learners by allowing them to make contributions in the knowledge that they will not be interrupted, which can lead to increased confidence both socially and in terms of using L2, shy learners tend to contribute to discussions on an equal footing with their more extrovert peers and even if no other user is online, the learner can interact with the environment itself (Davies et al, 1999).

Shneiderman (1997) concluded that collaborative team projects using CMC have the potential to raise motivation, reduce drop-out rates, and develop job-related skills. While Birnie and Horvath (2002) stated that Computer-Mediated Communication appeared to facilitate social interaction among learners and shyness, which was at first negatively correlated with traditional socializing and contact-intimacy was now positively correlated with internet socializing intimacy. It should be noted that students who were poor in their English proficiency have a tendency to become ‘introverts’ in the English class where they would usually prefer to remain silent rather than face the embarrassment of being laughed at or ridiculed for ‘talking in broken English’. Birnie and Horvath’s findings showed that these ‘introverts’ can become ‘extroverts’ in online environments where their anonymity were relatively assured.

Shield, Weininger and Davies (1999) stressed the importance of the social nature of MOO as a beneficial on-line communication in a group setting which creates a social environment which has a great potential in fostering learning and instruction. Finally, MOO

“...offers learners the opportunity to socialise in L2, communicating in an autonomous and authentic way, and to engage in meaningful, purposeful and productively challenging tasks. Working on tasks in collaboration with peers and external (target language) communication partners, learners participate in learning events that provide an L2 experience which is contextualised, more efficient and more motivating, thus increasing their confidence and fluency in using L2. In addition,

there is more qualitatively new potential for an improvement of social, cultural and linguistic competence than any "closed-shop" language learning material or teaching limited to the traditional language classroom can ever strive for.”

(Pellettieri, 2000)

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the research design, the participants of the study, the research procedure, the research setting, the use of tasks in the MOO sessions, the data collection methods, and the data analysis.

3.2 Research Design

The research design was tailored to fit the study which was descriptive and qualitative in nature. The flow-chart on the next page describes the step by step operation of the research:

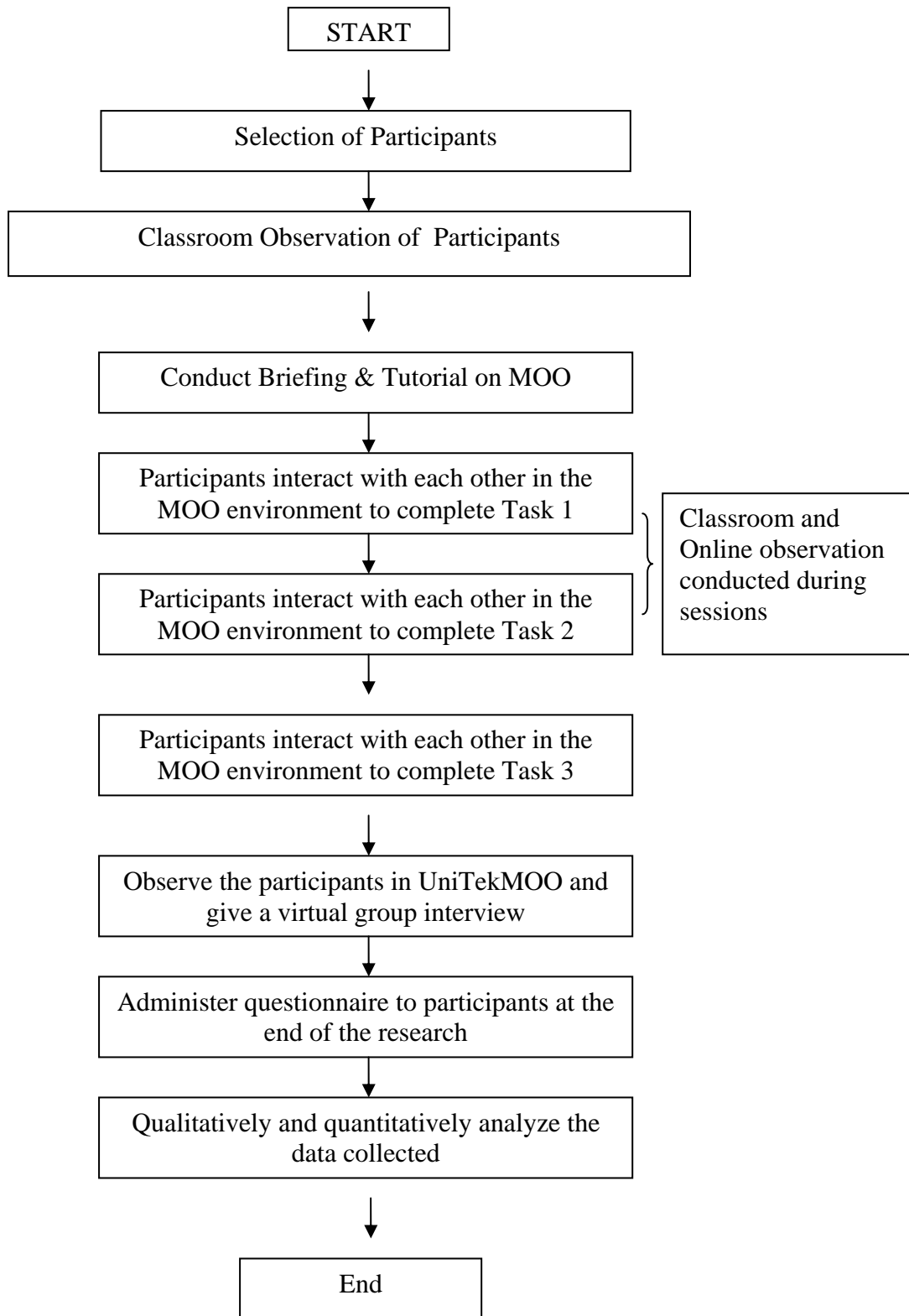


Figure 3.1 : Research Procedure

3.3 Participants of the study

A total of 12 students volunteered for the study. All of them are males. Below are their details. Nicknames were used to protect their privacy.

Table 3.1: The List of Participants and the results of their SPM English

No	Username	SPM English
1	Student1	B4
2	Student2	B4
3	Student3	B4
4	Student4	C5
5	Student5	C5
6	Student6	C5
7	Student7	C6
8	Student8	C6
9	Student9	C6
10	Student10	C6
11	Student11	D7
12	Student12	D7

3.4 Research Setting

Since this study aimed to investigate the use of a virtual environment (MOO) in promoting communication skills among students, most of the data collection methods involved the MOO environment. For this purpose, a temporary MOO server was set up in digital lab 1, FPPSM. The MOO environment created on this server was named UniTekMOO.

UniTekMOO, in essence, was a new installation of the WinMOO server inside of a virtual learning environment system. WinMOO itself was developed by Christopher Unkel who ported the original Unix version of the LambdaMOO server to a Win32 version. UniTekMOO used the latest version of WinMOO (version 0.1.0beta8) published on 30 January 2000. The virtual learning environment system used was the Encore version 4.0., an open source MOO project developed by the University of Dallas, Texas.

Four rooms were created within the UniTekMOO. The first room was the “lobby” where participants will arrive when they first logged in into the UniTekMOO server. The other

3 rooms were linked to the lobby. These three rooms were named White, Red, and Blue. The participants were grouped together in 3 groups, 4 to each group. Below is the diagram on how the rooms were arranged.

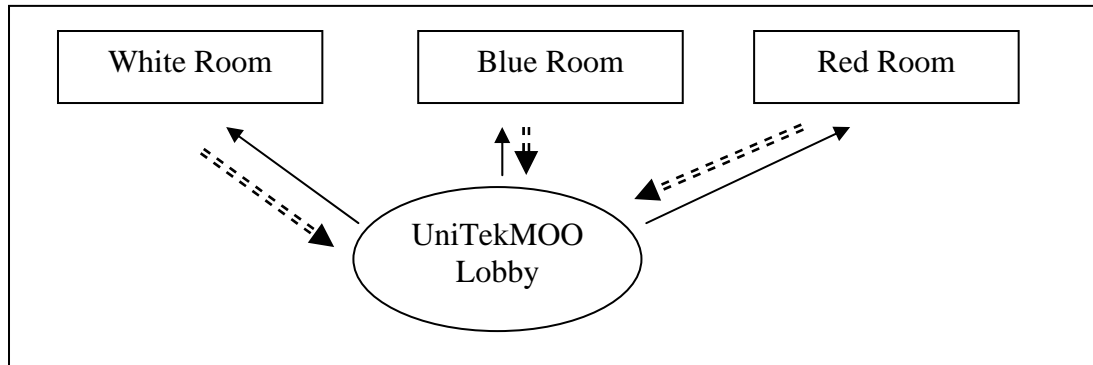


Figure 3.2: Layout of UniTekMOO

In the diagram above, when participants log in into the UniTekMOO server, they will immediately arrive at the UniTekMOO Lobby. Then they will see a screen similar to the one displayed below.

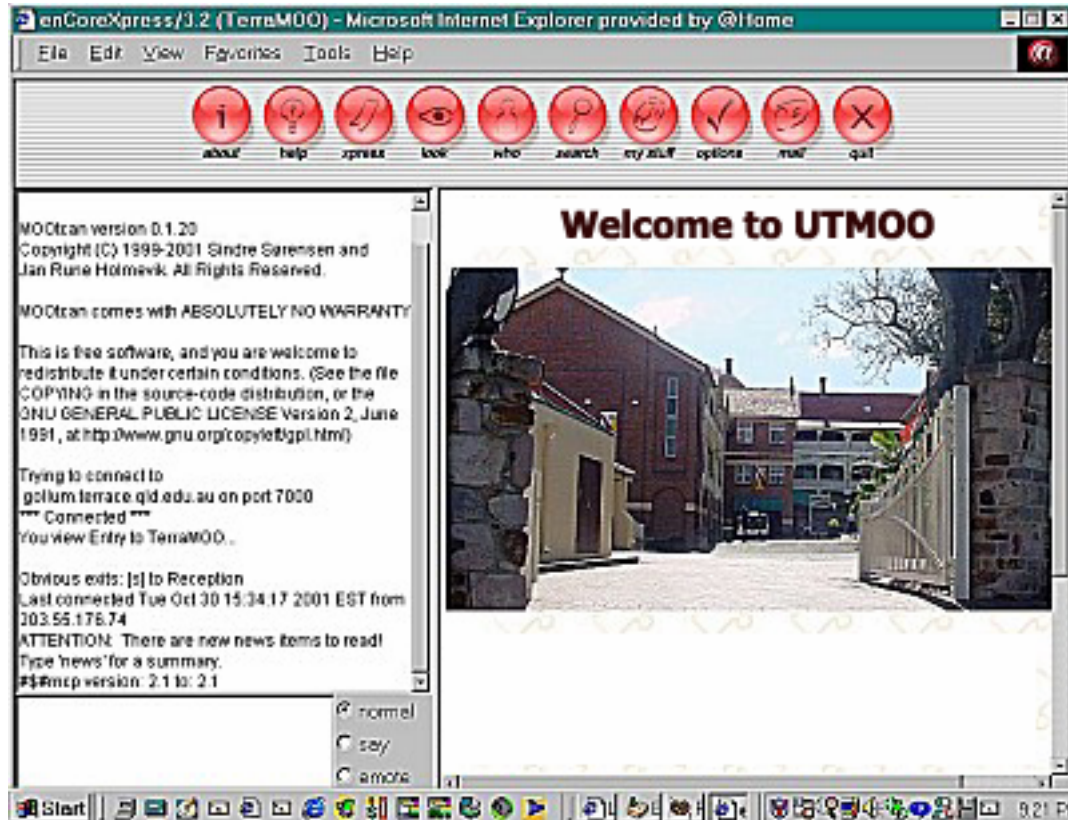


Figure 3.3: Screenshot of MOO interface

Once they arrive in the lobby, they will see a picture of a helipad on the right side of the screen. Below the picture they will see the description as below:

“You walked down the steps of the helicopter and looked around. You see a wide expanse of virgin forest surrounding you on all sides. You smiled. “I’ve always wanted to visit the tropical forests of Malaysia,” you thought. Far off in a distance to the north, you see three buildings standing next to each other. Each of the buildings was painted in distinct colours. One was painted entirely in white while the other two were painted blue and red. You see pathways from the helipad leading to each of the buildings.”

“Where do you want to go now?”

Similarly, each of the buildings has a description of its own. The participants can click links to each of the rooms (buildings) from the lobby. From the rooms, they can come back to the lobby via a link. Besides clicking a link, they can also move from room to room by typing the appropriate commands in the text box on the lower left corner of the interface.

3.5 The Use of Tasks

In order to gather relevant data, participants were required to complete certain tasks in the UniTekMOO environment. Three tasks were given to them to complete. All tasks required them to communicate with other members of their group in order to complete all tasks. Since the aim of this study was to learn about their communication skills and their interaction experience in the UniTekMOO medium, the use of tasks was highly appropriate.

The table on the next page shows the three tasks that the participants had to accomplish. The successful completion of these tasks required the participants to actively interact with their team members.

Table 3.2: The three tasks given to participants

Task	Instructions
Task 1	<p>Your team has been assigned to one empty room. Your task is to furnish the room with 10 items. Discuss with your team members what the items are going to be. Each item must be associated with the Engineering field. Each item chosen must be unanimously agreed to by all team members. Once you have chosen the items, place them in your room and describe them in one paragraph. Finally, on an A4 paper, list down the items that you have chosen and briefly explain why your team has chosen them.</p>
Task 2	<p>(The instruction for the task below was given in the form of a 'note' placed in each of the 3 discussion rooms in the UniTekMOO).</p> <p>There appears to be some writing on the note ...</p> <p>Good Afternoon all. Below is today's task for your group.</p> <p>Discuss among your group members about important inventions for humankind and in particular for the engineering field.</p> <p>List 3 inventions which are very important for humankind and another 3 inventions which are important for the engineering field.</p> <p>For each of the invention, you must state</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What the invention is 2. Who is the inventor 3. The history / background of the invention 4. It's contribution to the humankind/engineering 5. Why your group chose it <p>You have 1 hour to finish the task.</p> <p>Good luck!</p>
Task 3	<p>In your group, choose just one item from the six you have discussed earlier. Create that object in your room and describe it as much as you can before the end of the session</p>

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Several instruments such as online observation, a questionnaire, and online interviews were used to gather the data. Content analysis was also done on the Chat logs that contained interactions of the participants.

3.6.1 Classroom Observation

Prior to exposing the participants to the UniTekMOO environment, they were observed in a class in group discussion sessions. The group discussion was about a group project that they were working on in the English for Academic Communication class. This observation was used to gauge their level of oral communication skills in English. Besides this, we also observed their participation level in the class. Basically, we wanted to get a general impression of their skill level in face-to-face interaction.

3.6.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered at the end of the final session (Task 3) within UniTekMOO. This questionnaire was used to elicit responses regarding the learners' attitude towards the UniTekMOO and their interaction experiences within it. It tried to find out whether the participants felt that their interaction experience in the MOO environment has either encouraged or discouraged them in using English in their face-to-face communications. Furthermore, it also attempted to find out whether their experience within the MOO environment has influenced their attitude towards learning and producing English.

3.6.3 Online Interview

We observed the MOO sessions by logging in and joining the MOO sessions. Since there are four 'rooms' altogether, we occasionally went back and forth between rooms so that we can observe each group and help them along with their tasks, if necessary. However,

we did not attempt to be inside the rooms all the time. This was to ensure that the participants were not intimidated or become uncomfortable because their lecturers were “inside” the rooms with them. After the participants’ completion of Task 3, we also conducted a short online interview in UniTekMOO to get immediate responses from the participants on their experiences with UniTekMOO.

3.6.4 Chat Logs

Chat logs are recorded sessions within the MOO environment. In each room a recorder was placed and ‘turned on’. The recorder then recorded all the conversations that took place inside the rooms. The participants’ recorded interactions were then analysed. The chat logs were particularly useful to answer the research questions regarding the communication skills of the participants and their interaction experience using UniTekMOO.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis of this study involved a search for patterns or generalisations across multiple sources of data which were classroom observation, chat logs, an online interview, and a post-session questionnaire. The majority of the data analysis was qualitative in nature. Descriptive analysis was used on the classroom observation, the post-session questionnaire, the online interview and part of the chat logs. In addition, the chat logs were also analysed using interactional analysis. All data were used to validate each other. A summary of the method of data analysis to answer each research question is shown below:

Table 3.3: Method of data analysis in answering the research questions

Research Question	Data Collecting Instrument	Method of Data Analysis
<u>Question 1</u> In what way does the use of virtual	Classroom observation	

environment (MOO) promote / inhibit communication skills among ESL learners?	Content analysis through Chat logs Questionnaire	Descriptive analysis
<u>Question 2a</u> In what way does the learners' interaction experience within the virtual environment promote English language learning?	Content analysis through Chat logs Questionnaire	Interactional analysis Descriptive analysis
<u>Question 2b</u> In what way does the learners' interaction experience within the virtual environment influence their perspective / attitude towards learning and producing the target language?	Questionnaire Online interview	Descriptive analysis Descriptive analysis

By using four instruments for data collection, the researcher was able to cross-validate the data and get more comprehensive answers to the research questions. Since the number of participants were small, the findings from the data could not be generalised. However, it is hoped that they would give a good idea as to whether the use of a MOO environment would benefit learners' use of English communication skills.

The next chapter discusses the analysis of the data collected. The findings have been tabulated and described in detail. They are then analyzed to find out emerging patterns.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the analysis of the data collected in the study. It is divided into three main sections. The first section examines the impact of MOO on the interaction of the participants. To find this out, an analysis was done on the notes from the classroom observation, on the MOO chat logs, and on the responses by participants towards “Section A” in the questionnaire. The second section scrutinises the effects of the participants’ interaction experiences within the MOO on their language learning. This was achieved through the analysis of the MOO chat logs and the responses towards “Section B” in the questionnaire. The final section discusses the perception of participants on their MOO experience and on the MOO virtual environment itself. To achieve this, the responses to the online interview and to the “Section C” of the questionnaire were analysed.

As previously stated, there were 4 methods of collecting data which were classroom observation, content analysis of chat logs, online interview, and a questionnaire. The classroom observation notes were used to identify the personality of the students in the classroom and to a certain extent, their skills at oral interaction. This is important to determine whether there were any changes to their personality and behaviour when they were exposed to interaction within the MOO environment.

A wealth of data was gathered from the MOO chat logs. The 3 sessions of MOO chat by 3 groups of learners produced more than 1,900 lines of text. The MOO chat logs were analysed in two ways; the first was to look for characteristics of oral-like activities (orality) such as turn-taking, the existence of speech-like conventions, and speech acts within the interaction which would indicate that some activities which are similar to oral discourse were taking place; while the second was to look for “negotiation of meaning” or negotiated interaction activities which, in the field of SLA, are important elements which would lead to L2 acquisition and, by extension, to oral discourse development.

The online interview and post-session questionnaires were used primarily to find out the perceptions and attitudes of the learners on the MOO environment itself and on their interaction experiences within it. This data would indicate whether they liked to use the MOO environment for language development purposes and whether they thought that they have benefited from their interaction experiences within it.

4.2 Impact of MOO on interaction of low or limited proficiency English learners

To discover the impact of the MOO environment on the interaction of low proficiency learners, data gleaned from the classroom observation, the MOO chat logs, and the questionnaire were analysed. Below are the findings:

4.2.1 Notes on Classroom Observation

The classes consisted of 45 first semester Engineering students. It is from this class that the 12 participants to this study were recruited. After selecting the participants, the whole class was observed in general to identify the extroverts and the introverts, the students who liked to participate in discussions and those who shied away from them. For the purpose of this study, the term ‘introvert’ was defined as learners who did not attempt to interact in class while ‘extroverts’ were those who made attempts to interact in class whether in the English or other languages. It was noted that those who made the effort to discuss in English and those who attempted to use English only when the lecturers were

within hearing distance. Similarly, those ‘problematic’ students would not speak in English even when asked directly.

After the selection, observation became more focused on these students. The table below shows a summary of their traits and their level of oral interaction in English in the class.

Table 4.1 Participants’ personality and level of oral interaction in class

Username	Persona -lity	Level of Oral Interaction in English	SPM English
Student1	Extrovert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - would occasionally volunteer to answer questions asked in class. - would usually use English. Also - prone to make remarks in class, e.g. targeted to the females such as “ladies first”. 	B4
Student2	Introvert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - never volunteered to answer questions - would answer questions directed to him in English. - was quite active and would speak mainly in English during group discussion. 	B4
Student3	Extrovert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - would occasionally volunteer to answer questions. - would usually use English in class discussions. - an assertive person and would volunteer as a leader in discussions. 	B4
Student4	Extrovert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - never volunteered to answer questions but did enquire about class assignments on several occasions after class. - would usually use Malay in class discussions. - attempted to use English on a few occasions. 	C5
Student5	Introvert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - never volunteered to answer questions. - would usually use Malay. - seldom contributed in group discussions. - a quiet and shy person. 	C5
Student6	Introvert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - never volunteered to answer questions. - seldom contributed in group discussions. - a very quiet person. 	C5
Student7	Introvert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - never volunteered to answer questions. - would usually use Malay. - seldom contributed in group discussions. - a quiet and shy person. 	C6
Student8	Introvert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - never volunteered to answer questions. - would usually use Malay. - seldom contributed in group discussions. - a quiet and shy person. 	C6
Student9	Extrovert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - never volunteered to answer questions. - would answer in English to questions directed at him. - would use mainly Malay in discussions. 	C6

Student10	Introvert	- never volunteered to answer questions. - would usually use Malay. - seldom contributed in group discussions.	C6
Student11	Introvert	- never volunteered to answer questions. - would attempt to use English in class discussions. - seldom contributed in group discussions.	D7
Student12	Extrovert	- never volunteered to answer questions. - would usually use Malay. - would regularly contribute in group discussions (in Malay)	D7

From the above table, the 12 participants can be grouped into two general categories; extroverts and introverts. Out of the twelve, five can be classified as extroverts and the other seven classified as introverts. From the five extroverts, only two of them, Student1 and Student3 would occasionally volunteer to answer questions in class. This could be due to their English proficiency level which is much higher when compared to the other 3 extroverts. Student1 and Student3 both obtained B4 in their SPM English while the other three, Student4, Student9, and Student12 obtained a C5 and lower in their SPM English. Student4, Student9 and Student12 never volunteered in class. However, Student4 did consult after class to inquire about assignments and about the MOO research. On all three occasions, he communicated in non-standard or broken English.

As for Student1, he could be regarded as active where he sometimes interjected remarks made by the lecturer in response to statements or remarks made by other students, especially the female students. While Student3 appeared more serious in class and would limit to responding to the lecturer's questions only. However, he seemed to be the leader for his group during group activities. During several class discussions, he would be the one who talked the most and regarded well by his group members. Similarly, Student4, Student9, and Student12 were generally active in class discussions. However, only Student4 made several attempts to speak in English which could be that he wanted to be portrayed as a 'proficient English speaker' among his peers. Student9 and Student12, on the other hand, usually use Malay even when the lecturer was nearby. This was probably due to their low or limited proficiency in English which made them uncomfortable or unwilling to speak in English.

From the table above, there are 7 introverts in the group. The most common characteristics among these participants are:

1. they never volunteered to answer questions
2. they seldom contributed in class discussions and
3. they usually use Malay.

Despite of the 3 characteristics mentioned above, we found that those students who were more proficient would use English such as Student2 who was quite active in group discussions. However, among the introverts who gained a C5 in their SPM English, Student11, who obtained a D7, would occasionally use English during the infrequent occasions in group discussions compared to the others who mostly used Malay. Two interesting inferences can be made here: i) that limited proficiency students who are introvert in nature would not usually choose to speak in English and ii) despite his limited proficiency, Student11, attempted to speak in English during discussions. In addition, he was always eager to please the lecturer, always attentive in class and was quick to follow instructions given. He seemed to fit the description of a 'good student' and seemed motivated to learn English.

In sum, the classroom observation concluded that the majority of the participants (8 participants) would not interact in English in class nor did they have the inclination to do so except for a few of the students, who seemed more proficient than others, would attempt to use English with others.

4.2.2 Analysis of the MOO Chat logs

It is important that in order to boost the oral proficiency of learners, elements which can help with their learning of the oral skills must be present. Many researchers have suggested in general that synchronous CMC tools such as MOO can help learners with their oral interaction skills (Chun 1994; Kern 1995; Schwienhorst 1997; Warschauer 1998; Negretti 1999; Pellettieri 2000). They agreed that even though the use of synchronous CMC is predominantly in a written medium, the interactions within it are predominantly speech-like. It is these speech-like elements which will ultimately contribute to the development of the oral interaction skills of the language learners. Therefore, in analysing the MOO chat logs of the participants, we attempted to find out the types of speech-like elements which occurred within them.

The first speech-like element found within the chat logs was turn-taking. Turn-taking is a characteristic of spoken discourse. Next we examined the turns to see how many percent of the interaction within them were predominantly in English and how many were predominantly in Malay. The table below summarized the findings.

Table 4.2 Chat logs for Blue Discussion Room: Turn taking and predominant language used in interaction

Username	Turns	Turns Predominantly In English	Turns Predominantly in Malay
Student1	158	97	61
Student2	97	94	3
Student5	85	62	23
Student7	100	79	21
Total	440	332	108

As the table above indicated, there were a significant number of turns which occurred during the MOO sessions. The table above summarized the interaction of only 4 participants during 3 sessions of interaction within the MOO environment. The high number of turns signified that active interaction had taken place in the MOO. Added to this, analysis of the language used within the interaction revealed a surprising fact - nearly 75.5% of the interactions were conducted in the English language. Further, the two limited proficiency learners who were also introverts, Student7 and Student5, not only interacted predominantly in English but they also interacted much more frequently than expected. In the table above, Student1 and Student2 who were mid-level learners had 58% interaction turns while Student7 and Student5 had 42%. This would not have happened in typical classroom discussions.

Table 4.3: Analysis of turns within all chat logs

Chat Sessions	Turns	Turns Predominantly In English	Turns Predominantly in Malay
Blue Sessions	440	332	108
White Sessions	336	241	95
Red Sessions	382	284	98
TOTAL	1,158	857	301

The table above summarizes the turns taken in all the chat sessions. For the White and Red sessions, a similar phenomenon to the Blue sessions was observed. For the White sessions, for example, 71.7% of the turns were predominantly in English and for the Red sessions, 74.3% of the turns were predominantly in English. On average, in the three sessions, 74% of the interactions were conducted in the English language. This seemed to indicate that there was a much higher level of interaction in English which took place in the MOO environment if compared to classroom activities.

The second speech-like element found within the chat logs is what was termed as ‘speech-like conventions’ by Wan Fara (1998). They “refer to the manifestation of intonation or stress in words or phrases as well as tone of voice” (p. 87). In MOO, these conventions are realized through the capitalization of words or even sentences to indicate intonation or stress points and to signify that the chatter is shouting or attempting to attract someone’s attention. The examples from the chat logs below illustrate these conditions:

Example 4.1: Capitalization to indicate intonation or stress points

Student5 says, "PISTON OK"

Student5 says, "no 2 how about car HENRY FORD"

Student1 says, "find the history"

Example 4.2: Capitalization to indicate shouting

A) Student2 says, "HELLO HELLO, anybody in here?"

B) Student7 says, "STUDENT1, POINT NO 3 NOW"

Some other speech-like elements found within the chat logs are speech acts such as questions, exclamations, greetings, and leave takings. The table below illustrates examples of speech acts found within the chat logs:

Table 4.4: Speech acts and their number of occurrences in the chat sessions

Type of Speech Act	Examples	Number of Occurrences
Questions	1. Student10 says, "what to do now?" 2. Student3 says, "what item?"	37

	3. Student12 says, "how about calculus?"	
Exclamations	1. Student11 says, "???" 2. Student3 says, "Student4!!!!!!"	5
Greetings	1. Student7 says, "Hello" 2. Student1 says, "Ello Student7" 3. Student2 says, "Ello Student7, Student1"	26
Leave Takings	1. Student8 says, "byeee" 2. Student2 says, "ok see u all"	7

From the table above, a number of speech acts in the participants' interactions can be found within the MOO environment. The most frequent speech acts used in the interactions were 'questions' followed by 'greetings'. This is most likely due to the nature of the interactions within the MOO environment. Since the participants were asked to complete group tasks, it would be natural for them to ask many questions among each other in order to complete the tasks. Greetings constituted the second most speech act found in the chat sessions. This might be because there were 9 sessions altogether, 3 for each group. In each session, the participants had the opportunity to greet each other before continuing with their tasks. On the other hand, leave-takings and exclamations constituted the least speech acts used in the participants' interactions. The leave-takings were not that many because the sessions usually ended abruptly as only 2 hours could be allocated for each session in the digital lab. The participants were given as much time as possible to complete their tasks and most sessions ended by asking them to stop and log off.

Some other speech-like elements present in the MOO interactions include discourse markers such as markers used at the end of questions to elicit response or other markers used to draw attention to a statement made by the interlocutor. Other discourse markers found include feedback tokens. The table below shows the types of discourse markers used within the MOO environment.

Table 4.5 Types of discourse markers present in the MOO interactions.

Type of discourse marker	Examples from the chat sessions
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To elicit response	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Student12 says, "do you agree Student6?" 2. Student7 says, "what do u think?"
To draw attention to a statement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Student1 says, "Student5, excuse me, Student5"
Feedback tokens	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Student1 says, "I agree with Student5" 2. Student9 say, "good work Student10"

In summary, the analysis of part of the chat logs revealed many elements existing in the MOO which can be construed as speech-like. We believed that these elements could help the participants in their real-world oral discourse if the participants were to use the MOO environment frequently and over a period of time. In real life, the participants seldom get the chance to practice interacting in English because they rarely, if at all, speak in English with their peers. Furthermore, in the English classes, they did not have the chance to practice frequently because of time limitation. Even if they did get the chance, many of them would choose not to speak in English because of shyness. On the other hand, the MOO environment has given them a 'safe place' to practice these speech-like elements to their hearts' content without having to be embarrassed or to feel awkward.

4.2.3 Responses to the Questionnaire (Section A)

In order to find out more about the impact of the MOO environment on the communication skills of the participants, their responses to the Section A of the questionnaire were analyzed as follows:

Table 4.6: Responses to the question "Discussion in the MOO environment helped me interact more effectively with others / group members.

Student	Response	Additional Comments
Student3	Agree	My writing skills is higher than my speaking skills
Student1	Agree	In writing skill
Student6	Agree	Because we can improve our english by communicate or interact in English. It will make us familir with it
Student8	Agree	Easy to explain with writing

Student12	Agree	Easy to me to interact with others by writing
Student2	Agree	Cause we don't need to feel shy when we pronouns the wrong sound
Student11	Agree	I will feel shy when speak face to face with members
Student4	Agree	Because we use English
Student7	Agree	It is because we use fully simply English
Student10	Strongly Agree	Easy to communicate with each other. Main ide directly can be transfer to the other
Student9	Strongly Agree	Because during this time I was found that I can improve my vocab and my written words
Student5	Strongly Agree	Because we can discuss about our work fluently and it can increase my vocabulary

The table above shows the answers to the question “I found that discussion in the MOO environment helped me interact more effectively in English with others / group members.” Out of the 12 participants, 9 of them answered that they agreed with the statement and 3 of them answered that they strongly agreed with the statement. From the table, we can see that all participants believed that the MOO environment have helped them interact more effectively in English with their peers. They were also asked to elaborate why they chose the answers. Three of them answered that the MOO environment has helped them because they used English in their interactions in MOO. This might be due to the fact that in the real world they either did not have the chance or the courage to interact in English with others. Two of them indicated that the MOO environment has made it easy for them to communicate with each other. Student10 specifically said that his main ideas can be directly transferred to others. This is very true in the MOO, because the interaction was displayed on the computer screen, the participants can know exactly what was meant by their peers when they wrote their messages. For example, Student8 and Student12 specifically said that they found it easy to interact with others by typing their messages on the screen. Yet another important boon provided by the MOO environment to the participants is that they did not feel shy communicating in the MOO environment as opposed to communicating in the real world. This might be attributed to the relative anonymity afforded to participants by using the nickname convention.

Table 4.7: Responses to the question “Online discussion in the MOO environment has motivated me to interact in English.”

Student	Response	Additional Comments
Student10	Agree	Can change some information in group members
Student3	Agree	I can improve my writing
Student1	Agree	We helped each other in English through writing and speaking
Student9	Agree	To more speaking in English as a way to improve my language
Student6	Agree	By given the opinion, or information when doing discussion we might use English
Student5	Agree	Its gave me a lot of new word that I haven't see before
Student8	Agree	Can get information from other member
Student2	Disagree	
Student12	Strongly Agree	Because I can learn how to spelling
Student11	Strongly agree	We have to think in English
Student4	Strongly agree	Because I will try my best to give best idea in my sentence
Student7	Strongly agree	The way is when we changing our ideas during task. Every person give their own idea

The table above shows the responses to the question “Online discussion in the MOO environment has motivated me to interact in English.” Out of the 12 participants, 7 agreed to the statement, 4 strongly agreed, and 1 disagreed. As seen, an overwhelming majority of the participants thought that the MOO environment has motivated them to interact in English. This might be due to the fact that the MOO environment did not pressure them as would face-to-face interactions, especially for the limited proficiency students. 3 of them said that the MOO environment has helped them in exchanging their ideas better. The MOO environment could have provided a platform where every participant can initiate the discussion and give their opinions without fear of being interrupted by their more dominant peers as would usually happen in face-to-face group discussions. Some other elaborations given by participants on their answers include:

- i) the MOO environment has enriched their vocabulary and helped them with spelling,
- ii) has prompted them to think and interact in English,
- iii) has given them a platform where they can help each other improve their writing and speaking skills.

4.3 Effects of Interaction Experience within MOO on Language Learning / Acquisition

Besides wanting to know the impact of the MOO environment on the interaction skills of the participants, we wanted to find out the effects of the interaction experience of the participants on their language learning in general. The answers to this are the interaction analysis done on the MOO chat logs and the responses to the “Section B” questionnaire.

4.3.1 Analysis of MOO Chat logs

A sure way to know whether an L2 learner has acquired the language is through successful negotiation of meaning (Long, 1983). It is through interacting with people who are more competent in L2 that the learner maximizes the comprehensible input which he/she receives, and crucially, the interaction which occurs as a result of lack of comprehension is vital to the learner’s language development. While the first part of the analysis of the chat logs concentrated on identifying the speech-like elements in the chat logs, this analysis attempted to identify the negotiated interactions which occurred in the chat logs. In particular, this analysis looked at elements of repairs such as comprehension checks, clarification requests, confirmation checks, repetitions, and recasts. Below are the results of the findings.

Table 4.8: Occurrence of Negotiated Interactions within the chat logs

Types of Negotiations of Meaning (Repair)	Gloss & examples from chat logs	Number of occurrence in chat logs
Confirmation checks	A speakers attempt to confirm that he has understood an utterance via the partial paraphrase Student3 says, “need more items” Student3 says, “ how about thermodynamics?” Student11 says, “ item = topic?”	3
Clarification requests	An explicit demand for an elaboration or a reformulation of an idea, which requires a rerun of the troublesome utterance in question Student10 says, “I ask the meaning of mankind” Student10 says, “somebody help”	6

	Student8 says, "mankind is human kind"	
Comprehension checks	A speaker's attempt to prompt another speaker to acknowledge that he has understood a particular utterance Student10 says, "What is invention?" Student8 says, "In Malay 'cipta'an' Student8 says, "Got it Student10?"	9
Repetition	The repetition, in isolation, of part of an entire erroneous or otherwise problematic utterance Student4 says " they scatter like chickens..." Student3 says, "scatter?"	12
Recast	Implicit error correction Student10 says, "klik write and choose copy" Student8 says, "ok. Click right and then copy. Then?"	7

The entire chat logs by 3 groups for 3 sessions each produced 1,158 turns. From the table above, the total number of negotiated interactions (repairs) only totaled 37. This was just about 3.2% of the total number of turns. This could be due to several reasons. The first is that most of the students were at the same level of language proficiency if based on their SPM English results. In an environment where the interlocutors are at the same proficiency, negotiated interactions seldom occur. In Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983), it is mentioned that negotiated interactions will occur optimally in an environment where the L2 learners are involved in interactions with native speakers or competent non-native speakers. Out of the 12 participants, only 3 participants achieved B4 in their SPM English while 9 others achieved C5 and below. The competency level of the 3 who achieved B4 in the SPM English was also far from perfect. Therefore, it is safe to say that in this study, only a small number of negotiated interactions occurred due to the small gap in competency between the low proficiency learners and the low-intermediate English proficiency learners.

The second reason why only a small number of negotiated interactions occurred is probably because of the nature of the tasks given. Since the tasks given required the students to focus on meaning, rather than form, not enough negotiated interactions took place. The students were put in a situation where the completion of their given tasks was

of primary importance. They never realized that their language use was going to be analyzed and scrutinized. Therefore they did not concentrate in typing messages which are grammatically correct. Instead they concentrated on being understood by their group members so that they could complete their given tasks in the given time.

4.3.2 Responses to the Questionnaire (Section B)

In order to find out more about the effects of the participants' interaction experiences on their English language learning or acquisition, their responses to the Section B of the questionnaire were analyzed. The results are as follows:

Table 4.9 : Responses to the question “The skills I learn from MOO has helped me in my daily communications in English with my peers

Student	Response
Student1	Agree
Student9	Agree
Student6	Agree
Student5	Agree
Student8	Agree
Student12	Agree
Student4	Agree
Student3	Disagree
Student2	Disagree
Student11	Disagree
Student7	Strongly Agree
Student10	Strongly Agree

From the table above, it was found that 9 students agreed that the skills they have learned from the MOO environment has helped them in their daily communications in English with their peers while only 3 students disagreed with the statement. This overwhelming agreement seemed to indicate that these students genuinely thought that the MOO environment has helped them in their communication skills in English. Out of the 3 students who disagreed with the statement, two of them achieved B4 in their SPM

English. Since they were the better ones involved in the interaction sessions, the other students would have learned new language skills from them. Therefore it is understandable that they did not feel that the MOO environment has helped them with their communication skills.

4.4 Perception of Participants on MOO and Their Interaction Experiences within it.

This section deals with the perception of the participants on the MOO environment and their interaction experiences within it. To elicit answers from the participants, two methods of data collection were used. The first was the online interview and the second was a questionnaire. The sections below discuss the analysis of the data collected from both sources.

4.4.1 Responses to the Online Interview

Table 4.10 : Participants' attitude towards the MOO environment

Student	Response
Student1	I like it. Very interesting
Student8	Not present during this session
Student6	Interesting
Student7	This programme is good
Student11	good, but it too 'kelam-kabut'
Student9	Ok. it's good for our mind and I can know a new knowledge
Student12	very interesting
Student10	not bad ..interesting..enjoyable..can chat each other
Student4	No answer
Student2	Quite good
Student3	Ok. i think it is good for discussion
Student5	Not present during this session

From the table above, it was found that only 9 participants responded to the question. This is because on the day the online interview was conducted, two students were absent and one participant did not answer the question. From the 9 responses, all of them said

they thought that the MOO environment was ‘good’ or ‘interesting’. Some specific positive comments include “I think it is good for discussion”, “I can know a new knowledge”, “enjoyable”, and “I like it”. There is however one negative comment which was “[it is] good but too *kelam-kabut*’. In general, we can say that the majority of participants regarded the MOO environment as a good tool to use in helping them with their English language learning. This is probably due to the fact that firstly, it is an interesting tool which enabled them to chat with each other and interact with the environment within, and secondly, it has provided them with an enjoyable experience.

Table 4.11 : Participants’ comments on the advantages of MOO

Student	Response
Student1	improve use computer and also english. Effective
Student8	Not present during this session
Student6	Challenging
Student7	Can improve my english. Effective discussion
Student11	i think it can improve English
Student9	can chatting easily and faster
Student12	Did not answer
Student10	The information can deliver directly...to another person
Student4	i think moo is such a good chat room, and very interesting,but i couldn't no longer use this moo and don't familiar with this new chatroom. goupwork is good. we can change ideas wiht each other and improve our English
Student2	Did not answer
Student3	yes..!!can improve my english. but it can improve my writing skills, not my speaking skills
Student5	Not present during this session

From the table above, only 8 participants answered the question because two of the participants were not present and the other two did not answer. From the 8 respondents, 4 of them said that one of the advantages of MOO was that it can help them improve their English. This is probably because most of the interactions within the MOO were conducted in the English language. The students probably had little chance or inclination to use English in the real world. However, in this virtual world, they can do so without fear or embarrassment. Others cited other advantages of using MOO such as it can help

them improve their computer and writing skills, and it can be used as a medium to exchange ideas, especially in group work. This is particularly true in synchronous CMC environments where participants had to type somewhat quickly in order to keep up with the conversation. Another prerequisite of using the MOO is that participants had to have at least a basic knowledge of the Windows platform. Some others said that they can chat easier and faster using the MOO environment and they can also conduct better group work activities in it. This is probably because every participant in the group can read what was written by their group members. Unlike face-to-face interactions where the interlocutors might sometimes misinterpreted and could not understand what the other person is saying. Unlike in the MOO environment, each person can know what exactly was being said because the message was there on the screen in black and white. Finally, one of them cited that the MOO has provided him with a challenging environment to work with. This student probably love challenges and like to experiment with new things.

Table 4.12 : Participants comments on the disadvantages of MOO

Student	Response
Student1	lack used comunication skill. mouth to mouth
Student8	Not present during this session
Student6	dont have any comunication skill
Student7	i agree with Student10
Student11	is hard to give idea coz we have to typing quickly
Student9	time consuming
Student12	Did not answer
Student10	may be have a problem when we want to speake to a public..if we only use this moo program
Student4	Did not answer
Student2	Did not answer
Student3	it is slow..because we need to type
Student5	Not present during this session

To gather responses on both the pros and cons of the MOO environment, some comments on the disadvantages of the MOO were elicited from the participants. From the table, only 7 participants answered the questions. Of the 5 who did not answer, 2 were not present and 3 chose not to answer. We would like to believe that the 3 who did not answer could not find any disadvantages to the MOO environment. Of the 7 who

answered, 4 of them thought that the disadvantage of the MOO environment was that it did not provide them with an avenue for oral interaction. This statement has some truth in it. Even though the MOO environment contains a wealth of speech-like elements which could indirectly help them with oral communication skills, the medium itself does not provide facilities for oral interaction. If they want to practice speaking on the computer, other software such as Microsoft NetMeeting can provide the necessary facilities. 3 other participants said that the interaction in the MOO environment had to be done in a slow pace, and thus time consuming, because they have to type in their messages on the computer. This is also another setback to the MOO environment. In order to be able to use the MOO environment to its fullest, good typing skills are essential because slower typists might have the problem of their messages not being ‘heard’ by the others and the faster typists will usually be able to dominate the interactions because they can type more messages in less time.

4.4.2 Responses to the Questionnaire (Section C)

Besides examining the responses to the online interview, the perception of participants on the MOO environment and their interaction experiences within it were also gauged through the Section C of the questionnaire. Below is the analysis of the questionnaire in detail:

Table 4.13 : Responses to the question “ It is fun to interact in English in the MOO environment”

Student	Response	Additional Comments
Student1	Agree	More confidence in speaking and writing
Student8	Agree	Because MOO environment is interesting
Student6	Agree	Through it we can learn English together
Student7	Agree	We can change our idea and improve English to much better
Student11	Disagree	Because we have to read the sentence on the skrin, if we read slow, we can’t follow the discussion
Student9	Strongly Agree	Because MOO has many programs that make me fun
Student12	Strongly Agree	It is interesting to use
Student10	Strongly Agree	It is easy, not feel too shy

Student4	Strongly Agree	It is simply like chatting but not bored
Student2	Strongly Agree	Cause we can express in our views in form of words and dun need to feel shy
Student3	Strongly Agree	I can type what I like
Student5	Strongly Agree	Because I can tell or discuss with someone without feeling shy

From the table above, we can see that the overwhelming majority of students (91.6%) thought that interacting in English within the MOO environment was a fun activity. Only 1 participant disagreed that it was fun to interact in English within the MOO environment. Four of the participants said that interacting in the MOO environment was interesting. One of them said that this was because the MOO environment “has many programs” that interest him. This is particularly true. The MOO environment has many features. Text based chatting is only a small part of it. Other features include the ability to create virtual objects and interact with them and the integration of the web, audio and video files within it. 3 other participants complimented that the MOO environment was fun because they did not feel shy to interact within it. This is probably because the MOO has provided them with an environment where they did not feel threatened or embarrassed to interact. 2 others claimed that the MOO environment has boosted their confidence in interacting in English. This also signals that the MOO environment is a fun place to be in. 2 other participants claimed that they like using the MOO environment because they can learn and collaborate with their friends in learning English. Because they are in a fun environment, the students did not mind working on their language with their friends. This seems to indicate that the MOO environment can help those who wanted to study English in groups.

Table 4.14 : Responses to the question “ I am more confident in interacting with others offline after interacting with my peers in the MOO.

Student	Response
Student10	Agree
Student3	Agree
Student1	Agree
Student9	Agree
Student4	Agree
Student7	Agree

Student6	Disagree
Student2	Disagree
Student11	Disagree
Student5	Strongly Agree
Student8	Strongly Agree
Student12	Strongly Agree

The table above shows the responses to the question “I am more confident in interacting with others offline after interacting with my peers in the MOO.” From the table, we could see that the majority of the participants agreed that they have become more confident in interacting with others offline after their interaction experience within the MOO. Out of the 12 participants, only 3 disagreed with the statement. The majority of the participants might have gained confidence in interacting in English after undergoing a few MOO sessions in the English language. This is probably because the MOO environment has provided them with a more conducive environment for interaction in English to take place. As a result, they have gained more confidence in interacting in English.

It should be noted however that this study recognizes the shortcomings of CMC based interaction as opposed to the real world oral interaction. Unlike real world oral discourse which is a multi-dimensional and complex activity, combining a myriad of elements that provide meaning such as non-verbal signals and other paralinguistic elements, interactions in the MOO environment are predominantly text based.

However, it could also be argued that the average classroom interaction activities would also fall short of the desired ‘real world’ oral discourse. In our experience in teaching English classes in tertiary institutions for several years, we are convinced that learners would not gain much from classroom ‘oral interaction activities’. The introvert learners would still shy away from making conversations, letting their more extrovert peers to hog the conversation floor. Moreover, learners with limited oral proficiency skills would not normally express their ideas in English in the classroom setting.

Though the MOO environment is predominantly text based, it nevertheless contain many elements which are speech-like such as turn-taking, various speech-like conventions,

speech acts, and discourse markers. These speech-like elements would certainly help the students with their learning of oral communication skills. Besides this 'orality', interactions in the MOO can also produce 'negotiations of meaning' among the learners. These are essential for the acquisition and learning of the target language, and to a certain extent, to the betterment of oral face-to-face communication skills. Furthermore, the MOO environment is a 'safe and stress-free' medium for shy and taciturn learners. It is a medium which can 'level the playing field' for these learners. And since many of its characteristics are similar to oral discourse, it is hoped that at the very least, it can help by being the bridge towards better oral interaction among low proficiency learners.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter presents the conclusions and implications of the research. First, a summary of all the findings from the analysis in the previous chapter is highlighted. Next, a section that describes the three ways of how the participants of this study have benefited in their English language learning, i) by helping them in their communication skills; ii) by overcoming their inhibitions and iii) by boosting their confidence. This will then be followed by a discussion on the implications of the research to UTM specifically to English language learners and teachers in general. Following this, some suggestions for future research and some limitations to the study were revealed. Finally, suggestions for future research were also proposed.

5.2 Summary of Findings

Although the number of participants was not that big, a wealth of information was obtained. For example, in normal classroom situation based on our observations, it was found that there was little spoken interaction in English between students in the classroom. Students, especially weak ones, prefer to interact in Malay in their group discussions. Some of them would only attempt to interact in English in the lecturer's presence. Only a handful made the effort to communicate in English with their peers in these discussions. In contrast, the MOO environment has provided them with a rich interaction experience in English. Through the chat logs, it was found that more than

74% of the interactions in the MOO environment were conducted in English. We believed that the total number of hours spent on the MOO, which was 18 hours, should be adequate enough for us to make some generalizations and conclusions on the findings.

It is our belief that the MOO environment has the potential to help students with their oral interaction skill due to the fun nature of the environment. The interaction experiences within the MOO can become a bridge towards better face-to-face interactions. This is because through the MOO environment, the students encountered and experienced many speech-like elements such as turn-takings, speech acts, speech-like conventions, and feedback tokens. By being familiar with them, it is hoped that these students would use them in face-to-face interactions in real face-to-face situations. Apart from the above, instances where students were involved with negotiations of meaning or negotiated interactions within the MOO environment were also found. Long's interaction hypothesis (1981) stresses that in order for acquisition to take place, there has to be negotiated interactions between the learners and their more competent counterparts. These negotiated interactions would help the learners in repairing their errors in the English language. Added to this, a majority of the participants claimed that their interaction experiences within the MOO environment has helped them interact more effectively with their peers. Some of them also said that unlike real world interaction, they did not feel shy to interacting with their peers within the MOO environment.

Some other interesting findings in this study include the claim by participants that by using the MOO environment, they have enriched their vocabularies and spelling. Likewise, the majority of the participants claimed that their interaction experiences within the MOO environment have motivated them to communicate in English in the real world. Some of the participants also liked to do group activities in the MOO environment. They feel that they can perform group activities better within the MOO environment than doing them face-to-face. Finally, some of the participants also claimed that the MOO environment has given them a platform where they can collaborate with and help each other in their writing and speaking skills.

5.2.1 Benefits to Oral Communication

From the initial observation in the study, it was found that the participants were in a sore need to enhance their oral communication skills. A majority of the participants, especially those who obtained a C5 or lower grade in their SPM English were found to be weak in their oral communication skills. Based on our experience in teaching first and second year students, we believed there is a serious lack of oral communication skills in English among UTM students. In a university where the majority of students are Malays and where the majority of lectures are conducted in the Malay language, it is not surprising that UTM students are quite weak in their oral interaction skills. Something could be done to overcome this deficiency.

One of the aims of this study was to find out whether the oral communication skills of English language learners can be improved through the use of the MOO environment. From the data analysis of the chat logs, the questionnaire, and the online interview, it was evident that this is so. In the chat logs, the students managed to interact in English about 74% of the time. During these interactions, they used speech-like conventions such as speech-acts, discourse markers, and feedback tokens. By familiarising themselves with these speech-like conventions, they have moved one step closer towards the betterment of their oral interaction skills. From the participants' responses to the questionnaire and the online interview, it has also been found that they regarded the MOO environment as beneficial to their communication skills.

Further analysis of the chat logs revealed that participants also negotiated meanings during their interaction. These negotiated interactions are important in language acquisition. Successful negotiated interactions will lead to language acquisition among learners. Although the participants did not demonstrate many negotiated interactions during the sessions, this can be remedied in the future by bringing in native speakers or competent non-native speakers into the MOO environment so that more negotiated interactions can occur.

In summary, this study has demonstrated that the MOO environment can become a powerful tool to help students overcome their problems in communicating in English. Familiarity with speech-like conventions and involvement in negotiated interactions will

certainly bridge the gap towards face-to-face oral interaction. However, in order for the MOO environment to be effective, some of the participants need to be native speakers or competent non-native speakers in the English language. This would promote more negotiated interactions which are essential to second language acquisition.

5.2.2 Overcoming Inhibitions and Increasing Confidence through CMC

As a CMC tool, the MOO environment is a good setting for practicing English, especially among limited proficiency learners who are shy or for those who do not have the chance to practice their English in real situations. The MOO environment is a fun place to be where learners can interact with each other and with the objects created within it. From the analysis of the study, the majority of students regarded the MOO environment as an interesting place to be in. They also claimed that it has provided them with a fun atmosphere. According to Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis (1981), learners will be able to acquire the language faster if the affective filter was lowered. A fun learning environment such as the MOO would lower the affective filter considerably.

Furthermore, Krashen's Monitor hypothesis states that learners will be able to monitor and correct their utterances if 1) there is sufficient time, 2) the focus is on form and not meaning, and 3) the learners know the rule. In the case of the MOO environment interaction, learners definitely have sufficient time to monitor their utterances. Added to this, they also had the advantage over spoken interaction because they can see the messages that were written. Therefore they can monitor more aspects of their utterances such as syntax and spelling. The setback in the study was that the focus of the interactions was not on form but on meaning. This would not promote language acquisition. However, this could be remedied by designing specific tasks for the students to do in the MOO environment that would require them to focus on form. Similarly, in this study, since the majority of the learners are limited proficiency learners, they most probably did not know the rules. This problem can also be alleviated by involving higher proficiency students or native speakers in the sessions.

The majority of participants also claimed that they are more confident in interacting in English after the interaction sessions in the MOO. Although these claims could not be proven in a quantifiable way, the fact that they made this claim at all shows that they are

more prepared to interact in English than they were before involving themselves within the MOO environment. A higher level of confidence can greatly help language learners to overcome their fear of speaking.

5.3 Implications of the Study to UTM and English Language Teaching

The study was initiated by our concern over UTM students' lack of proficiency in oral communication skills. It is our belief that this study has contributed in finding some answers to alleviate this problem. Firstly, we believe that it would be a great boon to UTM if the MOO environment, in this case, UniTekMOO, is introduced and heavily promoted in UTM. It would surely enhance UTM's reputation as a technology university by having a 'virtual campus' where both students and the faculty can interact with each other. There is more to the MOO environment than just 'chatting'. Other important features include the ability for lecturers to conduct virtual classes in it, the highly interactive nature of the MOO environment where audio and video can be incorporated, the permanency of objects created within it, and most important of all, the ability to form and develop a full-fledged community within it.

For students, UniTekMOO can become an avenue not only for language learning but also for self-expression, for the learning of their core subjects, for having fun, for contact and community building, and for a myriad of other things as well. Furthermore, involvement in the MOO would encourage students to enhance their computer skills and also their keyboarding skills. Similarly for lecturers, the MOO environment can help them teach better and can give them better tools for teaching.

The benefits of the MOO environment for language learning and teaching are numerous. Teachers should support their traditional in-class oral communication activities with MOO interaction or vice versa. This way, the learners who are introverts or shy can equally participate in the interactions. Teachers also can collaborate with other teachers from Malaysia and from other countries to conduct MOO sessions in tandem. Imagine the benefits to the students if they can interact with native speakers on a regular basis. While this would be almost impossible in traditional class activities, in the MOO environment it is just a matter of connecting to the internet and using the MOO software.

For the language teachers and learners as a whole, this synchronous CMC tool called MOO can definitely lead them into wondrous untrodden paths. There are many features which could be exploited for language learning and teaching within the MOO environment, many of which lie outside the scope of this study. It is our belief that all language teachers should invest their time and effort to learn and use the MOO environment in part or in whole in their language teaching activities.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research and Limitations of the Study

The MOO environment offers a great opportunity for authentic communication to take place within a virtual environment on the internet or on a local area network. This study has examined the effects of the MOO environment and the interaction experiences within it to a small number of low or limited English proficiency students.

As a continuity to this study, research should be done focusing on some other variables. It is interesting to know the results of MOO interactions which involve only 2 students, 3 students, and bigger number of students per group. Perhaps, if students are paired up in dyads, more turns and more interactions could be produced. Another variable that could be studied in further detail is an environment where students with low proficiency skills are grouped together with native speakers or non-native speakers who are highly proficient in the target language. Yet another variable which could be studied is the effect of different tasks or interaction activities for the students. Perhaps, some form-focused tasks could be utilised instead of meaning-focused tasks.

Another variable which could be manipulated is the length of the study, expose the students to a semester-long ongoing activities. Longer duration studies can help researchers to establish patterns, especially where negotiated interactions and interlanguage development are concerned.

The studies proposed would certainly contribute more to the value of synchronous CMC language teaching and learning methodologies. In this era of e-learning, smart schools,

and smarter teachers, it is vital that we embrace ground-breaking technologies such as the MOO and add them to our teaching arsenal.

This study was not without its limitations. Since this was a preliminary study, the number of subjects are small. Therefore, generalisations have to be considered with care. Also, due to time constraint in conducting the research, the subjects are only exposed to MOO for a relatively short period of time which in our opinion, is too short to make strong conclusions.

Another limiting factor is the availability of the infrastructure. It was unfortunate that this study was conducted during a period when UTM's network was recovering from a number of virus attacks. In the wake of these attacks, the network administrator from our faculty was reluctant in putting the MOO server on our digital language laboratory's network. It was only after much persuasion that he relented to our request. Furthermore, since the digital language laboratory is usually fully booked, we had to arrange a time outside of normal office hours to conduct the MOO sessions. Thus, only a few sessions could be held for the participants to firstly learn how to MOO and secondly to interact within it.

Yet another limiting factor was that the study failed to address individual differences. The MOO interactions seemed to have benefited the lower proficiency students more than the higher proficiency students. This was evident from the comments by Student2 and Student3 that they did not feel that their interactions in the MOO environment have helped with their oral communication skills.

5.5 Conclusion

This preliminary qualitative study attempted to find out the impact of using synchronous CMC Virtual Environment application, MOO, on learners' English communication skills and the effects of their interaction within the MOO environment on their language learning. The findings suggested that second language learners can benefit their language learning in general and to their oral communication skills in particular by involving themselves in interactions within the MOO environment. Furthermore, as have been

clearly demonstrated in this study, it was evident that interactions within the MOO environment can provide a rich input of speech-like elements. Continued interactions within this environment can familiarise them to these elements. This, in turn, will become a bridge to face-to-face communications for these learners. Added to this, there was also evidence that a small number of negotiated interactions have taken place within the MOO environment. According to the interactionist and sociocognitivist views on language acquisition and learning, negotiated interactions are crucial for second language acquisition (Long 1983; Ellis 1992). Successful negotiations of meaning among learners can promote their language acquisition process. This in turn can help them in producing better output in their oral communication. Moreover, through interactions within the MOO environment, learners can also lower their inhibitions and increase their confidence in using the target language. On a lesser scale, students can also better their writing and spelling skills.

In conclusion, it was found that the MOO environment can benefit learners not only in improving their general English language skills but more specifically, in helping them with their oral communication skills. It is hoped that this study can open up more avenues for language learners to practice.

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APPENDIX A : QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer all questions truthfully. There is no right or wrong answers. Please circle only one answer and fill in the blanks where applicable.

Background information : 1) I am familiar / not very familiar / not familiar at all with Internet Relay Chat.
2) My SPM English result is _____ (please put in full eg C6 or A1)

Section A : Please circle the appropriate number corresponding to your answer

Answer scale : 1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Disagree

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree
Q1	<p>I found that discussion in the MOO environment helped me interact more effectively in English with others / group members.</p> <p>If your answer is 1 or 2, please elaborate _____</p> <p>_____</p>	1	2	3
Q2	<p>I have used English in my discussion in the MOO environment more than I have used it in my other discussions in the classroom.</p> <p>Why? _____</p> <p>_____</p>	1	2	3
Q3	<p>Online discussion in the MOO environment has motivated me to interact in English</p> <p>If your answer is 1 or 2, please tell us in what way? _____</p> <p>_____</p>	1	2	3

Q4	It is fun to interact in English in the MOO environment Why? _____	1	2	3
Q5	Using the MOO environment is a fun way to learn English communication skills Why? _____	1	2	3
Q6	Online discussion in the MOO has seriously limited my interaction with others / other members of my group If your answer is 1 or 2, tell us in what way? _____ _____	1	2	3
Q7	MOO is more effective in providing an environment for using English than IRC Why? _____	1	2	3
Q8	There are more advantages than disadvantages of online discussion through MOO Advantages : _____ Disadvantages : _____	1	2	3
Q9	Completing group tasks online is time-saving	1	2	3
Q9	The skills I learn from MOO has helped me in my daily communication with my peers	1	2	3
Q10	I am more confident in interacting with others offline after interacting with my peers in the MOO	1	2	3

APPENDIX B : ONLINE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Question 1 : What do you think of MOO?

Question 2 : What are the advantages of using MOO?

Question 3 : What are the disadvantages of using MOO?

APPENDIX C : SAMPLE MOO SESSION

- Start log: Friday, September 3, 2004 5:10:17 pm UNITEKMOO time --

Wizard leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 skemania arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 Ajib arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 skemania picks up Piston Cylinder.
 Ajib says, "i eter blue"
 Ajib says, "for infomation"
 Ajib says, "meh sini join"
 Ajib says, "mane org ni"
 beware arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 zul arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 Wizard arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 beware leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 skemania drops Piston Cylinder.
 zul leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 Wizard drops task1blue.
 Wizard leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 mohdamin arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 mohdamin leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 zul arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 skemania says, "Hello"
 Ajib says, "what we are going to do today"
 Ajib says, "please tell me"
 etchia888 leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 Ajib says, "whoever"
 etchia888 says, "testing 1, 2, 3"
 skemania says, "wait"
 zul leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 says, "hello ,everybody long time not see wat"
 etchia888 leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 Ajib says, "let discus"
 skemania says, "let do our task"
 Ajib says, "don't wast time"
 zul arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 skemania says, "What invention"
 Ajib says, "say somting"
 zul says, "how about aeroplane b'cause we can know easily the inventor"
 skemania says, "Who is it"
 etchia888 arrives from Discussion_Rooms

zul says, "wei kalau xkenal member baik xyah chatting"
 skemania says, "who the inventor"
 Ajib says, "let ar jgn gaduh"
 Ajib says, "mantain our."
 etchia888 says, "wat r u all talking about???"
 zul says, "the brothers of wright"
 Ajib says, "bagus jugak tu"
 zul says, "ok dah dapat satu "
 Ajib says, "amik kapal terbang je"
 zul says, "no 2 how ababout car HENRY FORD"
 Ajib says, "find the history"
 Ajib says, "wei korang wat satu2 ar"
 zul says, "ok, ok back 2 aeroplane "
 Ajib says, "pastu the contribution"
 skemania says, "ok"
 skemania says, "i more invention?"
 Ajib says, "pastu why we chose...."
 Ajib says, "cia don't you want say anyting"
 zul says, "because without this vehicle aku xdapat balik rumah"
 Ajib says, "we need your opinion"
 zul says, "ok the invention are "
 skemania says, "car"
 zul says, "ok lah"
 etchia888 says, "if car can ,why dun we choice motorcycle also??"
 skemania says, "we must have 6 invention ker?"
 Ajib says, "3"
 zul says, "it's enough now 1.aeroplane 2. car 3. motorcycle"
 skemania says, "humankind and engineering"
 zul says, "let's talk about the history"
 skemania says, "i agree with the three"
 Ajib says, "find the name inventor"
 etchia888 says, "why u agree with no,3"
 Ajib says, "korang paham ke"
 skemania says, "All three"
 etchia888 says, "sory lah kurang paham lah"
 Ajib says, "cari pencipta "
 zul says, "1.the brothers wright 2. henry ford 3. yuroshi yamaha"
 zul says, "no.3 i'm not sure"
 skemania says, "yes"
 zul says, "what yes"
 Ajib says, "wat je"
 Ajib says, "pastu we find sumbangan to manusia"
 etchia888 says, "i know why we choice no ,3 motorcycle"
 Ajib says, "aeroplane we can travel one country to one contry"
 zul says, "ok that's good "
 Ajib says, "cia"
 skemania says, "Save our time"
 Ajib says, "pastu car for everyday usu"
 Ajib says, "salah use"
 etchia888 says, "it because we can use motorcycle for tumbang girl!!!dating

right!!!"
 Ajib says, "ape tumbang"
 zul says, "nak tumbang girl aperrr"
 etchia888 says, "in english,tumbang stand for fetch!!have u get it now!!!"
 Ajib says, "moto used because it cheaper we can buy it"
 zul says, "emmm that's more better"
 Ajib says, "wat bede jgan merepek"
 Ajib says, "especiallly for student to buy moto rather than car"
 zul says, "ok the last qoestion?!"
 Ajib says, "when we talk about aero we can go to mecca"
 etchia888 says, "but car is safety than motor right!!"
 Ajib says, "alah kalau bawak kete x betul same gak mati gak"
 admans arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 Ajib says, "last quest"
 Ajib says, "why we chose."
 admans says, "fakri how to get in the picture"
 admans says, "hurry i waiting for you"
 Ajib says, "ni sapeni menyebuk ni"
 skemania says, "The real gas powered motorcycle invented by gottlieb daimler"
 skemania says, "klik your object"
 admans says, "what next"
 skemania says, "edit description"
 admans says, "o.k"
 zul says, "aisey nie IKLAN ape pulak nie"
 admans says, "next"
 skemania says, "edit appearance la"
 admans says, "sudah"
 admans says, "tapi tak boleh pun"
 Ajib says, "oi....."
 admans says, "o.k bye"
 admans leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 says, "walau, adam & skemania !wat r u both trying to do???"
 beware arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 Ajib says, "kita buka laman web kita cari sejarah nye palk"
 zul says, "ko pegi ler sorang"
 Ajib says, "aku x tau"
 beware says, "zul ko bincang ttg ape???"
 skemania says, "ok sorry guys"
 beware leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 Ajib says, "ni sape plak ni"
 aiman arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 Ajib says, "aduh ai"
 Ajib leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 aiman leaves for Discussion_Rooms
 etchia888 says, "hello, anybody here"
 skemania says, "yes, please state your view"
 etchia888 says, "i got alot of view. u want to listen to wat first???"
 Ajib arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 aiman arrives from Discussion_Rooms
 aiman leaves for Discussion_Rooms

zul says, "for the last question how about we answer because this vehicle make human do their work more faster and efficient"
Ajib says, "mane kawan2"
zul says, "ok,ok dah abis bab pasal humankind nie masuk engineering field pulak"
Ajib says, "aku xnampak korang pun"
Ajib says, "yang lain"
etchia888 says, "u tak nampak cox u leave the blue room just now"
zul says, "xde respond syaial.. blah arrrr"
zul leaves for Discussion_Rooms
zul arrives from Discussion_Rooms
etchia888 says, "hello guy wat should we trying to do now??"
etchia888 says, "talk something lah,why all keep quiet"
skemania says, "drop first motorcycle"
zul (asleep) has disconnected.
etchia888 (asleep) has disconnected.
skemania (asleep) has disconnected.
Ajib (asleep) has disconnected.

-- End log: Friday, September 3, 2004 6:58:55 pm UNITEKMOO time --