

YOUTHS' PERSPECTIVE ON CYBERSPACE ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

There are global effects on how the Internet has changed the way people live, work, communicate, recreate and participate in public life. This has definitely paved the way for various efforts by the Malaysian government and non-governmental bodies to create facilities and avenues to allow Malaysians to be IT savvy at work and their daily routines. The setting up of cybercafés, tele-centres, hotspots and other related wired spaces have concurrently opened more avenues for development and the enhancement of English language for individuals and groups. This paper based on a research reports the findings on youths' perspectives on cyber cafe activities and learning English in Malaysia. A total of 51 youths responded to a questionnaire and several youths were also interviewed. Findings suggest that cyberspace activities do help these youths in enhancing learning English to some extent. The paper thus concludes that incorporating Web activities in teaching and learning of English in schools and colleges is a positive move towards promoting language learning beyond the classroom.

Keywords: Cybercafés, Digital Spaces of Learning, Youths, Informal Learning, Learning English, Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Terdapat kesan global tentang bagaimana internet telah mengubah cara hidup masyarakat, pekerjaan, komunikasi, membina semula dan melibatkan diri dalam kehidupan awam ini. Hal ini pasti telah membuka jalan untuk pelbagai usaha yang dijalankan oleh pihak kerajaan Malaysia dan badan bukan kerajaan bagi mewujudkan kemudahan yang mendorong rakyat Malaysia menjadi pakar IT dalam pekerjaan dan rutin harian mereka. Penubuhan kafe siber, pusat telekomunikasi, tempat 'hotspots' dan tempat berkaitan yang lain telah serentak membuka lebih banyak jalan untuk pembangunan dan peningkatan Bahasa Inggeris untuk individu dan masyarakat. Kertas ini berdasarkan satu laporan penyelidikan tentang penemuan dari perspektif belia terhadap aktiviti di kafe siber dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia. Sejumlah 51 belia telah menjadi responden kepada soal selidik dan beberapa belia juga telah ditemui. Penemuan kajian mencadangkan bahawa aktiviti ruang siber membantu golongan belia ini dalam mempertingkatkan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris dalam batas tertentu. Hasil penemuan kertas ini juga mendapati aktiviti laman

web dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris di sekolah dan kolej adalah satu langkah positif ke arah mempromosikan pembelajaran bahasa di luar bilik darjah.

Kata Kunci: *Kafe Siber, Ruang Pembelajaran Digital, Belia, Pembelajaran Tidak Formal, Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

The growth and penetration of the Internet and Information Communication Technology (ICT) in important sectors have benefitted many nations globally. The Internet is a creative and empowering medium which can be used in numerous ways (Crystal, 2001). In developed countries, the Internet has reached substantial proportions of the population, for example in Germany (56.2%) and in the United States (68.8%). Stewart (2000:322) stated that in the United States the cybercafés started in the early 1990s. During the late 1990s, cybercafés became famous and important for the Internet users from all over the world. In 2000, the world's biggest cybercafé was opened in New York, providing 800 computers (Lachmayer, 2003).

The situation is, however, different in developing countries. In India for example, only 2.9% of its households had Internet access in early 2005. This is almost twice the average for African countries (1.5% Internet penetration), but still much lower than the world average (13.9% Internet penetration) (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/>).

The low rates of Internet access in developing countries like India and other countries are often traced back to low rates of personal computer ownership and the high cost of hardware. Another barrier is the low income level, which makes the Internet an expensive tool. Besides these economic factors, there are a variety of cognitive barriers like low literacy rates, lack of English language skills or lack of e-literacy skills to effectively use these new technologies (Warschauer, 2002b). This situation is to some extent quite similar to what is happening in Malaysia. In 1996, Malaysia proposed *Vision 2020*, a plan to build a fully developed, knowledge-rich Malaysian society by the year 2020 through the development of the ICT sector and the use of ICT to increase global competitiveness. With this vision, Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) was conceptualized in the same year with the full support of the government's vision to transform the nation into a knowledge based society. MSC is determined to spearhead this transformation through ICT enriched life to create a high-tech environment and infrastructure, to attract national and international investors in specific sectors like education, healthcare, commerce and manufacturing. Several efforts have been made by

public and private sectors to connect citizens to the cyber world via the Internet and the digital means by setting up cybercafés, telecentres and hotspots in urban and rural areas. This move is also a promising effort to narrow the digital divide and provide better avenues for increased participation in the digital age throughout the nation.

The digital age has created an impact on our lives and it plays a positive role in shaping digital culture amongst the youth of today. In many cases, youths are actively involved in what we call participatory culture. A participatory culture is one in which the members believe in their contributions and develop some degree of social ties with one another. In other words, youths are growing up digital. According to a recent study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than half of all teens aged 12- 17 in continental U.S have created media content and an estimated one-third of teens who use the Internet have shared their digital productions via the web through blogs, chat spaces and social networking sites (Lenhardt and Madden, 2005).

The Role of Cybercafés in the Lives of the Today's Youth

A Cyber Cafe can be defined as a shop, café or place which is convenient for the public to use a computer for a certain period by paying a certain fee (Damewood). The cyber cafe trend started in the 1990s and since then, they have sprung up in major cities and later in smaller towns. Cybercafés primarily emerged as entertainment hubs and social interactions centers but now provide valuable social spaces for the learning community.

These spaces mainly patronized by youths and adults mainly from schools, colleges and universities are increasing. This pattern becomes more profound with the blended way of learning designed by colleges and universities where learning takes place anytime and anywhere through the digital means. Currently, even school children patronize these digital spots to surf for materials to add quality to their school projects.

Cybercafés are used for different purposes in different parts of the globe. Sending and receiving electronic mail is the most common use of the Internet among all Internet café users. The Internet café users' patterns seem to have changed over time. New and young users usually start with entertainment and socializing activities, like chatting and playing games. After a while, more serious use, like surfing the net for information retrieval and research takes over. Due to the English language's dominant position on the World Wide Web, English language proficiency plays an important role for users in obtaining full benefit from their Internet café use. This means that most developed countries that have access to the Internet, speak or understand some form of English. The activities at

cybercafé thus become the key platform for the development of such skills, even if minimal in the beginning.

This section will review selected studies which were carried out to investigate the ways in which cybercafés are used by youth and for what purposes.

A study conducted by Laegran (2002) in Norway reported that the youngsters use cybercafés mainly to email friends and chat, search for music and movies and research topics which could help them plan for their education or travelling. On the other hand, a study by Wahid et al. (2006) in the city of Jogjakarta, Indonesia reported that people use cybercafés in Jogjakarta mainly for communication, instrumental and recreational purposes. In Turkey, children spend long hours in Internet cafés playing computer games, which are mostly in English (Yıldız Turgut and Pelin Irgin, 2009). In an earlier study, Macedonia (2004) supported that online games provide the platform to practice simple meaningful English language. Thus online computer games show potential not just for engaging and entertaining users, but also in promoting informal learning. Informal learning also includes a range of learning stimulated by general interests which is “caught not taught” (Davies, 1998). There is also growing evidence that many people including youths are engaged in a wide range of technology-based informal learning at home and the community (Cranmer, 2006; Facer et al., 2003).

According to Sefton-Green (2004:3)

... .computers and other aspects of Information and Communication Technologies allow children and young people a wide variety of activities and experiences that can support learning, yet many of these transactions do not take place in traditional educational settings. In fact many of these may not be considered “educational” according to our conventional understanding of that term.

According to Siemens (2004), informal leaning is a significant aspect of our learning experience. Learning can occur in a variety of ways – through communities of practice, personal networks and through work-related tasks. Driscoll (2000:9) earlier defined learning as human performance which comes “as a result of learner’s experience and interaction with the world”.

Mutula (2003) found that the students in Africa use cybercafés mainly for educational purposes while the business people tend to use them for business purposes and for electronic money transfer. In a similar study by Odero (2003) it was found that cybercafés are used more for educational research purposes by postgraduate students, while the undergraduate students use them for chatting, listening to music and for other forms or entertainment purposes. Chachage

(2001) found that cybercafés in Tanzania are mostly used for recreational and personal communicational purposes.

In Malaysia, Pramela (2007) found that a group of young adults, who frequent the cybercafés, surf the Net for information, play online games, send and receive emails and engage in online chats. The findings also showed that this cyber culture to a certain extent promote learning.

While we talk about cybercafés, we should not forget another alternative digital space created for users to be digitally connected, known as a hotspot. Hotspots are available at elite restaurants, coffee houses and shopping malls. These spots are wired with broadband facilities and offer other additional comforts. In Malaysia, such facilities are mostly found in major cities and towns. Efforts are currently being made by the government, non-governmental organizations and the private sectors in setting up learning spaces via e-community centres or telecentres in other less privileged places.

According to Norizan Abd Razak (2008) there are about 1945 e-communities centres or telecentres registered under the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) list in addition to a few non-listed telecentres. A telecentre provides various ICT services like computer classes, computer sale and advisory services, computer selling and servicing, card printing and writing official letter services and Internet access. The non-governmental organisations and private agencies jointly with the government have initiated various types of telecentres under the Eight Malaysian Plan (2001-2005) and the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) to provide ICT accessibility to the underserved communities so that the digital divide can be bridged. These efforts have paved the ways for technology to play a big role in changing the way Malaysian youths live, work, communicate, recreate and participate in public life. This worldwide phenomenon will create numerous opportunities for our youths to use English as the language of the web.

Learning English and the Internet

As said earlier, being digitally connected through cybercafés and hotspots has definitely opened more avenues and opportunities for promoting the use of English language for individuals and groups. Most learners of English are learning the language for practical reasons. Greater proficiency in English generally leads to better educational and occupational opportunities. This is because, today English is essential for progress and it provides the means of access to high tech communication and information. In fact, Kung and Chuo (2002) through their study proved that students view Internet as a good source for supplementary material in classrooms and the students claimed that learning English through the ESL websites suggested by their teachers is highly practical.

Learning also takes place in social networking sites such as the Face book that are now being used by some educators to communicate directly with students. There is also sharing of knowledge and information with virtual audience via instant messaging, blogging and comments, as well as through photos and videos. With all this and more, Web activities are increasingly utilized and it would be interesting to study what youths have to say about the use of English during their online activities at these virtual spaces.

According to Brown (2006) learning has become as much social as cognitive and it is intertwined with judgment and exploration. As such, the Web becomes not only an informational and social resource but a learning platform or medium where knowledge is socially constructed and shared. This justifies Warschauer's (2002a, 2004) argument that technology in English language teaching is now less about using computers as a tool to teach English effectively. It is now more about teaching English to help learners use computers effectively. What is important about literacy on the Internet is not just the ability to read and write in comprehensible language but also the ability to negotiate new roles and identities. Today, computers are used in a new way, to teach new types of writing that are emerging in the online era. According to Crystal (2001), new spelling conventions, non-standard spelling, emoticons, missing or minimal punctuation marks have become some features on the online writing.

Todd (2007) says that non-native speakers of English often use computers to enhance their use of English without necessarily trying to learn the language. Todd named the computer applications promoting such use Computer-Assisted Language Use or CALU. Some examples of CALU applications include computer-mediated communication, use of the online dictionaries and word processing where English is used incidentally.

The trend for the informal consumption, creation, communication and sharing of knowledge via ICTs has increased with the emergence of the so-called "Web 2.0" applications. Learners' use of such "read/write" Web activities at home is also on the rise. This would mean that the use of English via Web activities is surely growing.

THE STUDY

The study was conducted based on the rationale that this type of community based research can be beneficial to understand more about the youths' online activities that take place in cybercafés and hotspots pertaining to their language learning experience.

It was led by the following research questions:

1. What online activities do young adults who frequent cybercafés and alternative digital spaces are involved in?
2. How do young adult users perceive the relationships between cybercafe activities and English learning?

This research employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect the required data. The sample selected for this study comprises active Internet users at cybercafés and alternative digital spaces such as hotspots. Four sites were selected for the distribution of research questionnaires and collection of data (two cybercafés and Starbucks Coffee Houses in Putrajaya and Midvalley, Kuala Lumpur) to collect data from respondents via self-report questionnaires (Appendix A). The questionnaire designed by the researcher was piloted with five cybercafe users and revised. It comprised of questions that were meant to gather subjects' background information, their involvement in cybercafés and other wired spaces and their use of English language during their web activities there. Out of the total of 51 subjects who responded to the questionnaire, 10 users were selected to be interviewed. These users volunteered to share more in depth information. Hence an interview schedule comprising semi-structured questions (Appendix B) was designed for this purpose. According to Meriam (2002), purposeful sample is believed to yield the most information about the phenomenon of interest.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The ensuing discussion will present firstly the background information of the subjects according to age groups, gender, ethnic group, educational level and profession. It will proceed with information on their involvement in cybercafés or other wired spots and conclude with the use of English language during the online activities at these spots.

Most of the respondents (66.7%) were from the age group 18-22 years. A smaller number of respondents (13.7%) were from the age group 23-27. The rest of the respondents came from the age groups of 13-17 and 33-37. The findings showed that amongst the research subjects, youths between 18 and 27 years visit cybercafés and hotspots more often than the rest.

52.9% of the sample respondents comprised of males and 47.1% females. In terms of ethnicity, the majority were Chinese (43.1%), followed by Malays (33.3%), Indians (21.5%) and others (1.96%). 49% of the sample subjects were university students and 29.4% stated that they graduated from colleges. The rest of them had either primary or secondary school education.

Youth Involvement at cybercafés and digital spaces

60.8% of the sample mentioned that cybercafés or hotspots were near to their home that is within a distance of one to three kilometers. 19.6% claimed that cybercafés or hotspots were situated within a distance of 4 to 5 kilometers away from home. Most of the respondents mentioned that their transport to the cybercafés or hotspots was by car. The rest of the respondents either walked or travelled by motorbikes or bicycles. Only two of them said they travelled by bus to these places.

58.9% of the respondents stated that they preferred to visit cybercafés or hotspots sometimes. Only 5.8% preferred to use the Internet in cybercafés or hotspots daily. 62.7% mentioned that they go to cybercafés more frequently compared to hotspots. Only 33.3% of the respondents chose hotspots. Some of the respondent, who was financially better off, noted that they have their own laptops and that they preferred to go to hotspots in the evenings after studies or work rather than going to the cybercafés. Most of the respondents preferred the comforts of the cybercafés. Only a few respondents said that they preferred hotspots since they were free and offered more privacy.

Majority of the respondents preferred to go to cybercafés or hotspots at night because there were fewer users at that time. Few of them felt that night was the best time to hang out with friends at these places. 25.5% visited cybercafés or hotspots in the evening because they felt relaxed at that particular time. The others preferred to go to cybercafés or hotspots in the morning because it was less crowded. 49% respondents spent 1 to 2 hours a week in the cybercafés or hotspots whereas 45.1% respondents spent 2 to 4 hours a week. One respondent (1.96%) spent 4 to 6 hours a week and another respondent spent more than 6 hours. In terms of time, the respondents were not considered heavy users of the Internet facilities. This is probably because they are connected at home, college, university or the work place.

Majority of the respondents spent more than RM (Malaysian Ringgit) 20 a week in cybercafés. This is followed by 29.4% who spent RM 2 to RM 5 a week. 92.2% respondents had their own computer at home and 60.8% had Internet connection at their house. Although many of them owned computers at home, they were not connected. 62.7% respondents mentioned satisfaction when visiting the cybercafés or hotspots. This was because the Internet connection in cybercafés is quite fast and they find it easy to work there. Others were not satisfied to use the Internet in cybercafés or hotspots because they were crowded and uncomfortable. Some of the respondents stated that cybercafés were very noisy and expensive. Many of them said that they were introduced to cybercafés and hotspots by friends while some of them stated that it was their business associates who introduced them to these places.

As for preferences between cybercafés and hotspots, several responses were received during the interviews:

I prefer hotspots because it's free. While I work in cybercafés, I have to finish my work as soon as possible because the cost is incurred when surfing the internet. While in hotspots, I can take my time.

... need to have my own laptop, hotspot is out.

Hotspots more comfortable and not so crowded.

Actually, I don't really go to cybercafés, since there are lots of hotspots around my place. I have also internet access in my room. When I go back, I have internet access in my house.

Of course hotspots. Actually, this one is much cheaper. You don't have to pay anything and it's convenient. Most of the hotspots like Starbucks, we can enjoy our meal and at the same go online

People who visit the cybercafés or hotspots carry out various types of online activities. Most of the respondents visit cybercafés or hotspots to search for information, to chat and play online games. Apart from that, some of the respondents prefer to watch online movies, blog and do their assignments there. 78.43% of the overall respondents think that cybercafés or hotspots are important to them. There are quite a number of reasons why respondents use the Internet. The respondents use the Internet for entertainment, recreation and relaxation purposes such as to watch online movies, listen to online songs and so on. Apart from entertainment, some of the respondents use the Internet for educational purposes such as surfing net for information, to get online articles and journals, to download notes and so on. A few respondents use the Internet for trade and commerce, sports as well as other purposes. Other than that, reading online is also one of the activities carried out. *The Star* (A Malaysian daily newspaper) is the most preferred online newspaper among the respondents followed by other online newspapers like *Harian Metro*, *Kosmo*, *Berita Harian* and *The New Straits Time*.

Below are some responses from interviews as to what activities are carried out at these places:

... Hmm... send and receive emails because it relates to daily work and also chatting everyday.

Checking the emails, obviously and surfing the web and these days I'm kind of hook on Facebook as well and the all the application on the web.

Sending and receiving email once a while and chatting

Usually, I search for some materials for my assignments. I send emails to my friends.

I use to do communication activities using Facebook with my friends and then chatting. This is because I stay here in Malaysia and I have lots of friends in overseas. I like to communicate with them and this is the cheapest way to communicate with them.

Actually, I have my own blog but I don't really update it. I don't know why...

I have to do my own blog for my course but that time I did it because we were asked to. I don't use it now. Yeah, I do chat...like Yahoo Messenger because normally my friends also use that.

Chatting, Emails, Online games, downloading, music and movies. Blogging hmm... that depends. Maybe once in two weeks. Sometimes very frequent. Sometimes once in a month. It depends. But I send emails and chat daily.

The interview data shows that English language is used frequently especially as a language of communication in social networking sites, in blogging activities and in writing e-mail messages.

The Use of English Language

Based on the survey, the respondents who are still students prefer to use services like Yahoo, Google, Facebook, Wikipedia, Psychology Today and Friendster. Some of the language websites preferred by the respondents are online dictionary, translation websites and English language websites. 40 respondents (78.43%) feel that online activities such as online games, chatting and watching movies can improve language proficiency. They mentioned that these different activities help them improve their English language to a certain extent. These activities help improve speaking (35.3%), writing (31.3%), reading skills (33.3%), vocabulary (21.6%) and grammar (23.5%).

When you are travelling, you need to talk with foreigners. You need to use English and in that way it can help you to improve. Hmm...I think when I'm chatting with a foreigner and also surfing the internet, it helps me improve my reading.

Sometimes I can meet people virtually who are quite excellent in English online.

The tools such as yahoo messenger has the grammar checker, it would be better. If not, I would not check what I write.

Well, it depends on a...its similar to speaking...its also depends on the individual.

We are talking about online MSN and all that right... If we key in something we don't really care to check about the spelling and all that. So, it does not really make a difference. It just that you mispronounced certain words...

52.9% of the subjects mention that they use a grammar checker when sending emails or publishing in blogs. The respondents use grammar checkers to make sure their language is correct, to avoid misunderstandings and to keep their work error free. Some also respond "So that my friends don't tease me". Although findings suggest some conscious effort taken by the subjects to check on the grammar, it must be noted that 45.09% of them do not use grammar checkers. According to some of them, it takes time and some of them use informal language when they send emails.

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I do not think that it is necessary to use grammar checker because my friends do not mind mistakes.

because I am not doing my assignment.

I am used to that type of language.

I even use Chinese not English.

No, I don't really believe in grammar checkers. I use to correct whatever I write myself.

In yahoo messenger, we normally write very fast and then we don't have time to check our grammar whether its right or wrong. But it helps to improve proficiency in English by writing emails and chatting.

We don't always check for our grammars and we don't construct our sentences properly because basically we are talking to our friends. So, mix languages and also short forms, abbreviations. That's what we always use. So, I don't think online activity can help.

Thus the correct use of English is not regarded as important as these youths are quite comfortable with the informal language in the online texts. They believe that their friends will understand them perfectly well and they practice using the correct form only when doing assignments or school work because that work will be evaluated.

Oh yes, most of the software do come with the grammar checker. Of course the spelling check is always there. As far as I concern...well, sometimes there is a Green lines and you tend to change it but fortunately my language skill is not that bad and most of the time I don't have the green line appearing. Actually, you can learn English through all online websites. Depends on which Website you visit...like CNN, you can read stuffs.

One of the ways for me to see the different styles of writing of different people from different countries...and also...online readings. Most of the texts that I found in Internet are written in English. So, it really helps me in terms of vocabulary, styles of writings and many more... its very useful.

Chatting of course and sending emails...sending emails is actually one of the point here because here you have to be able to...especially in formal emails, you have to able to arrange a very good writing with correct grammar, and you have to see the flow. When you send letter to for example your clients or those people you work with, it must be proper right...and also...I like to access journals for my assignments and I think it helps me to improve my readings.

The above data explain that these youths find online reading very useful in improving their English especially in vocabulary-building. They also claim to have given more attention in their writings.

The respondents also agree that learning English is not intended or planned; it is an unconscious effort where the Internet or web users have to read and understand instructions which are mostly in English. There is also a tendency to visit other websites although this was not planned initially. According to the respondents, they read news, announcements, advertisements and other texts. This enables them to read more materials in English.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that youths visit cybercafés and hotspots for various reasons: educational, personal, entertainment and others. The Web activities they were involved in such as for social reasons like chatting and playing online games have enabled them to use English indirectly to some extent. Many claim to have improved their language. While the rules of grammar and spelling were not a major concern to these youths, there was evidence that the majority of the youth used the English language even if they practiced code switching. However, taking this into consideration, the authorities concerned can relook through research at how cyber culture can promote learning English in Malaysia.

Educators should be concerned with their students' immediate learning and future application of that learning in using English. Well-designed CALU-oriented applications can help with both learning and improve language use.

What is clear is that our youths have learned to adapt their language learning very quickly to meet the demands of the cyber world. Therefore this electronic revolution needs to be explored further to change the ways teachers and educators think in teaching and learning English. In fact, several courses at the tertiary and college levels have already incorporated ICT and multimedia in their course design and efforts have been taken to marry ICT and language learning to encourage learners to be autonomous, creative and at the same time learn English in a fun way.

The findings of this study can be concluded by considering a number of questions which can be framed for future research in this area. It can help to find out to what extent learners expect or desire to use 'informal' forms in the formal educational settings such as in schools or colleges for language learning. Besides, it is also beneficial to look into which ICT applications learners find most motivating and engaging. Conversely, it can also help to determine which ICT applications learners see as unsuitable for the classroom and why.

Lastly, in looking at these ICT applications in a meaningful pedagogical innovation, we must not dismiss the issue of how youths can be trained and taught to become socialized ethically in order to practise as an online community.

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