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The Online Reading Habits of Malaysian Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the differences in online reading habits between genders and investigate the relationship between socio-economic status and online reading habits. Using a questionnaire, a quantitative approach was administered to 240 Form-Four students from four secondary schools in Penang Island, Malaysia. Findings revealed that the respondents were active Internet users preferring the use of English when they were involved in online activities. All respondents, regardless of gender and socio-economic status, had similar online reading habits and yet they were more inclined toward social networking activities rather than reading as an academic activity. A discussion of the reason follows.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology is growing rapidly and the world depends on computers in the surge toward globalization. It has equally penetrated the field of education. As a result, pedagogies have changed to engage the latest technologies (Thierstein, 2009). The internet offers economical means for students to expand their research and learning beyond geographical boundaries and has the potential to open doors to information as infinite as the universe itself (Valauskas & Moyika, 1996). In other words, students can obtain information from all over the world by reading information online. Use of the internet by students is so widespread that one feels outdated by not using it. According to the World Internet Usage and Population Statistics (2103), 67% of Malaysians use the Internet (www.internetworldstats.com). Many of these users are students and they utilize it as a trendy and useful tool that enables them to be connected with the rest of the world.

English is not only the language of international communication but also the main language on the Internet (Moras, 2001). The use of the internet as a tool actually enhances the reading and writing skills of students in English. The fact that the majority of internet users communicate online in English has made English learners realize the usefulness of learning the language to enable them to enter the digital world of computers with ease. High speed internet has created an easy access to learning online and students all over the world are using English when they are involved in activities such as reading on the internet.

As students increasingly become involved in online activities, there is need to study their online reading habits. According to Tan, Ng, and Saw (2010), students are no longer interested in hardcopy printed material because of the availability of the varied, enormous amount of reading material and other activities online. New technologies generate new literacies that become important in a global information age (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). The internet has provided students with infinite sources of authentic materials in the form of news, graphics, video games, music, and the like, all of which are believed to enhance students' knowledge (Abdollahpour & Asadzadeh Maleki, 2012). All these changes taking place around the world, in general, and in Malaysia, in particular, give rise to the following two questions: As Malaysian students become increasingly familiar with the internet, has there been a discernible change in their reading habits? Are Malaysian students more prone to use the English language now that English has become the internet's preferred language?

Reading Habits

Reading plays an important role in education as a means of creating a highly literate society. An information-rich society would contribute not only to the individual's self-development but also toward the nation's progress (Kivunike, Ekenberg, Danielson, & Tusubira, 2014). For students, learning to read in a second language is a process that involves learning skills, learning a new vocabulary, and collective patterns. They also have to cultivate the ability to transfer these skills from the classroom to the real world where the language, usually English, is used (Anderson, 2003). There is thus a strong correlation between reading proficiency and educational success, and learners of English tend to make greater progress in language learning when equipped with strengthened reading skills (Bharuthram, 2012). Consequently, in the era of information technology, new approaches to teaching and learning skills such as to incorporate visual, oral, and written codes and texts need to be considered (Leu et al., 2004). It follows that reading must move beyond being located solely on paper printed media.

Online Reading

Reading online involves eyes interaction, computer screen, texts presented in hypertext, and comprehension of verbal and non-verbal information (Pino-Silva, 2006). Unlike traditional text forms which typically include a combination of two types of media, print and two dimensional graphics, computer texts integrate a range of symbols and multi-media formats including icons, animated symbols, audio, interactive tables, virtual reality environments and many more (Leu et al., 2004). Computers and the internet play a major role in the way readers are reading around the world and serve perhaps as the most comprehensive source of input (Leu, 2002). The World Wide Web is the virtual library bar none and serves as the most readily available information center for language learners (Singhal, 1997). Hagoood (2003) believes that the new media and online literacy are now part and parcel of life and educators need to view

them as a central aspect of literacy. However, Lyons (1999) argued that computer is unlikely to affect significantly reading habits in the perspective of history and current literacy trends.

In Malaysia, access to computers at school is rather low as school computer laboratories were confined to teaching technology rather than for accessing internet resources. However, in a study of UK students, 75% of students have access to computers at home and 92% have access to computers at school. It is the UK government's education strategy to stimulate and support the use of information and communication technology in teaching and learning as a means of raising educational standards (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). In the U.S., 94% of school children have access to the internet which they use for school related research (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, & Macgill, 2007).

Shen (2006) found that students prioritize the internet as an information medium and they go online mainly to get information, send and receive emails, download music, and use the chat rooms. In Taiwan, according to Tien and Fu (2008), 9 out of 10 undergraduates have their own computers and use them not only for fulfilling their academic requirements but also for entertainment. Surveys in Malaysia indicated that while students were efficient readers of e-mails and users of chat rooms, they did not use these media forms for writing blogs, reading the news online, and research and practicing school work (Yunus, Lubis & Lin, 2009). Another survey by Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper (2005) showed that not only do boys use the internet more frequently but they also use it longer.

Significance of the Study

Several studies have been conducted in many parts of the world to determine the relationship between computer technology and its implication toward English language teaching and learning (e.g., Albirini, 2006; Garrett, 2009; Kern, 2006). There is even speculation that students are wasting their time surfing the net for unproductive purposes (see, for example, Alhajjar, 2014; Iqbal, Noor, & Mian, 2014). The study reported here attempts to find out whether the respondents are reading online, and if so, why and what materials they view most often. Behavior patterns are also investigated from a language perspective. In addition, the study seeks to find out whether English is the language used online and whether the mother tongue has any influence in online communication?

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to explore the online reading habits among Form-Four students in urban secondary schools. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To identify the online habits among Form-Four students in urban schools.
2. To determine if English is the preferred language used in online reading among Form-Four students.
3. To investigate if there is a relationship between socio-economic status and the online reading habits of Form-Four students in urban schools.
4. To investigate if there is a significant difference between male and female students' online reading habits in urban schools.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study took place at four urban secondary schools in Penang Island, Malaysia. 240 Form-Four students were recruited as participants in this study. They were between 16 and 17

years of age. In each school, 60 respondents were chosen at random from the high achieving and low achieving groups. High achievement for the purpose of this study refers to students who obtained A's and B's in English in the PMR (lower secondary public examination taken at the age of 15) examination while low achievement refers to those students who obtained C's, D's, or E's for English in the PMR. Achievement in this study does not refer to the overall achievement of a student but only to the achievement in the English subject. An equal number of male and female students were chosen to represent an equal balance of both genders—30 male and 30 female students represented each group.

Instruments

A set of questionnaires was used to gather data. The questionnaire was adapted and modified from the questionnaire developed by Shen (2006) for the study on computer technology and college students' reading habits. The study also referred to a survey by Livingstone and Bober (2004). Both questionnaires referred to were used to investigate the online habits among college students, young people, and parents. Therefore, amendments were made suitable for Form-Four students in urban schools as respondents.

A reliability test was done with data collected from a pilot test and the Cronbach's alpha was calculated with a value of 0.832, indicating high reliability. The questionnaire was deemed valid only after several qualified lecturers vetted it and corrections made. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents in their respective schools through their English teachers who were briefed about the study. The respective teachers in each school carried out the questionnaires according to the time convenient to them after briefing their students about the purpose and process of the research. The students were reassured of the confidentiality of the results in order to minimize false responses from respondents.

The statistical package for the social science program (SPSS) version 17.0 was used in analyzing the data in this study. To investigate the research questions, descriptive statistics were used to describe some of the demographic variables in terms of frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Inferential statistics were also used to investigate questions pertaining to differences and relationships between the variables. The statistical procedures used for this study are the independent sample T-test and the Pearson Correlation. Hypotheses were tested at $p < .05$ level of significance.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Demographic Analysis

The number of male and female respondents were equal and enabled comparison of feedback based on gender. The number of respondents according to race were not equally selected. 46.7% of the respondents were Malay and 51.7% were Chinese. Indian students comprised a small number at 1.7%. This might be due to the population of the schools in these urban areas of Penang Island comprised mostly of Chinese and Malay communities.

The socio-economic backgrounds of the students were not predetermined. Based on the questionnaires, students whose parents or guardians were professionals such as doctors, teachers, or managers were considered to be from the high socioeconomic status group. Students whose parents were farmers, shopkeepers, hawkers, or drivers were considered to be from the low socioeconomic status.

Table 1. Analysis of Demographic Data

Demographic Data		N	Percentage
Gender	Male	120	50
	Female	120	50
Race	Malay	112	46.7
	Chinese	124	51.7
	Indian	4	1.7
Socio-economic Status	High	78	32.5
	Low	162	67.5
PMR English Achievement	A	97	40.4
	B	23	9.6
	C	46	19.2
	D	34	14.2
	E	40	16.6

As shown in Table 1, 32.5% of respondents were from the high socioeconomic status while 67.5% were from the low socioeconomic status. It was found that many of the respondents have parents and guardians who are shopkeepers and hawkers. Of the respondents, 40.4% earned an “A” in English in the PMR examination and 9.6% obtained a “B.” 19.2% had earned a “C” and 14.2% obtained a “D.” Only 16.6% of the respondents obtained an “E” in English, which is considered a fail grade.

Research Question 1. What are the online habits among Form-Four students in urban schools? What is the purpose for students to go online?

Data collected clearly showed that 83.7% of the respondents go online every day. Only 16.3% do not go online. Based on the findings, it is obvious that students often spend more than an hour online. They go online mainly to communicate through social networking tools such as Facebook and MSN. This includes viewing photos, chatting, and checking and sending e-mails. A number of respondents also indicated they go online to play games, watch movies, and listen to music. Some of the respondents do go online for educational purposes and to read the news but their percentage is low.

Table 2. Hours Spent by Students Going Online Everyday

Hours Spent Online	N	Percentage	Total Percentage
0 hours	39	16.3	16.3
1 to 3 hours	151	62.9	79.2
4 to 6 hours	39	16.3	95.4
More than 6 hours	11	4.6	100

Research Question 2. Is English the preferred language used in online reading?

When respondents go online to read, analysis of data revealed that English is indeed the preferred language. As Table 3 indicates, more than two-third (72.9%) of the respondents use English when they read online, while only 12.1% use Malay language, and 15% use Chinese.

Table 3. Language Preferred When Going Online

Language	N	Percentage	Total Percentage
English	175	72.9	72.9
Malay language	29	12.1	85
Chinese	36	15	100

Research Question 3. Is there a relationship between the social economic status and online reading habits among Form-Four students in urban schools?

The relationship between socio-economic status and online reading habits was investigated using Pearson product moment correlation coefficient. There was significance at the 0.01 level but there was a medium negative correlation between the two variables $r = -0.324$, $N = 240$. This result showed no relationship between socio-economic status and online reading habits. The online reading habits was computed using data from the questions, types of preferred online reading material, reasons for going online to read, and internet access to read online.

Research Question 4. Is there a significant difference between male and female students' online reading habits in urban schools?

This question was investigated using the independent sample T-test. Results showed no significant difference in the mean scores and standard deviation between male and female students' online reading habits; male ($M=7.1750$, $SD=2.12097$) and female ($M=6.9167$, $SD=2.14430$), $p=0.349$. The magnitude of differences between the two groups were small, indicating no differences in gender with regards to online reading habits which constitute types of preferred online reading materials, reasons for going online to read, and access to computer to read online.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Analysis of data indicates that 83.7% of the respondents went online daily. Results also show that respondents go online for entertainment purposes more often than they do for educational purposes. When they do go online, they do so to communicate through social networking tools and English is the preferred language when online. Furthermore, inferential statistics revealed no relationship between socio-economic status and online reading habits. Equally, there was no difference in gender and online reading habits.

The findings in this study suggest that students do spend time going online every day. This is in line with studies by Livingstone and Bober (2004) in the UK and Shen (2006) in Taiwan. Although students were found spending a lot of time online, the data analysis revealed that they were going online for mainly non-productive reasons. Students mainly go online to use social networking tools and for entertainment purposes. This is similar to the findings of Shen's (2006) study in Taiwan where he reported that college students go online to chat, listen to music, and to check e-mails. The study indicated that students rarely read e-books and journal articles online for educational purposes. However, findings clearly showed that students do go online for educational purposes with a relatively high mean score of 2.6. The most probable reason for this was because the study was carried out in urban area schools where students are encouraged to go online to assist them in their studies.

The findings also indicate that students prefer using English when they go online. The descriptive analysis on race indicate that although the majority of the respondents were Chinese and Malay, few chose their mother tongue as the preferred language when online. This may be due to the fact that materials available online are mostly in English.

The Pearson Correlation Test done to investigate the relationship between socioeconomic status and online reading habits shows no relationship between these two variables. The findings thus suggest that students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds have the same online reading habits in terms of preferred type of material and reasons for going online to read. This confirms the statement by Lyons (1999) who declared the computer revolution is unlikely to affect considerably reading habits in the perspective of history and current literacy trends.

The difference between gender and online reading habits was not established in this study. The results of the independent T-test indicated that there was no difference between the two variables in terms of types of material read online and the reason for going online to read. Both male and female students went online to read the same materials, had similar access, and had the same reasons for going online to read. Livingstone et al. (2005) similarly reported that there were few or fairly modest gender differences in access to the internet. Moreover, high and low achievers went online for the same reasons and they read the same type of materials online. The results show that there is no correlation between the two variables.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students do go online frequently but their purpose is not to read but, rather, to become involved in social networking activities and entertainment. Although the findings show that students do go online for educational purposes, it is clear that the purpose is not for reading. Consequently, to continue to hypothesize that students might go online to read instead of reading printed hardcopies would not portray accurately the true picture of the situation at hand.

Teachers are counseled to incorporate internet use for reading purposes by encouraging their students to go online to read. Teachers should equally take the initiative to explore the internet themselves and find reading materials suitable for their students. According to Tien and Fu (2008), students should be encouraged to spend more time using the computer to improve their academic work. While using the computer and the internet, students should be taught basic library and article searching skills, as well as good learning habits. The benefits of the internet should be disseminated and made available to all students. From a pedagogical point of view, the internet is a potentially powerful tool for teaching and learning English as a second language, especially when seen within the context of Malaysian schools (Tan et al., 2010).

In closing, it has become quite clear that computers and going online are popular activities among students, yet same students lack the awareness of how the plethora of internet resources can help them acquire better reading habits. Instead, they go online for all kinds of activities except reading. Online activities can be used as an important factor to motivate students to read. It is paramount that teachers encourage and guide students in the use of internet tools to enhance their reading habits. Reading is an important skill to be acquired, and technology can be used to motivate reading interest among Malaysian students. Most importantly, students must change their attitudes toward the use of the internet by not only looking at it as a form of pure entertainment but as a viable research tool for knowledge (El-Hindi, 1998). By tapping into new forms of communication via the internet, teachers can indeed help students foster more effective reading and writing communities.

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