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URBAN MALAYSIAN ADOLESCENTS' ONLINE ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Many Malaysian adolescents are immersed in the global contemporary, technological and digital culture. Their everyday literacy practices involve participation in a range of activities on the Internet. This study surveyed the online activities in English of 535 adolescents from five urban secondary schools in Penang, Malaysia. The participants comprised 333 male and 202 female students. While almost all the participants used English either as a second or third language, the percentages of language use on the Internet as indicated by them were: 77.06% in English, 8.16% in Bahasa Malaysia and 14.72% in Chinese. In addition, the study also reported the frequency and duration of Internet activities, students' interests and websites accessed. Some gender differences in the findings are also discussed. Based on the trends observed, the paper concludes with some implications for ESL education, in particular among Malaysian adolescents.

Keywords: Malaysian adolescents, literacy practices, Internet, ESL

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Increasingly the Internet has become a natural as well as necessary part of the everyday lives of many people. Loyal netizens include adolescents who are regularly drawn to the Net to engage in activities across school, nonschool, mainstream and alternative domains. The significant presence and literacies of adolescents in cyberspace have attracted the interest of many. While service providers on the Internet are quick to capitalize on young people's fascination and technical skills in a digital society, parents and policymakers

literacy episodes or events (Barton, 1994; Maybin, 2000). These events include, for example, negotiating and constructing meaning in one's blog, interacting asynchronously in a threaded discussion group and hyperlinking to make sense of online texts that are contrasted with texts associated with traditional print literacy. According to Martin-Jones & Jones (2000), "Literacies are social practices: ways of reading and writing and using written texts that are bound up in social processes which locate individual action within social and cultural processes" (pp. 4-5). As social practices, literacies are underpinned by values, attitudes, feelings and social norms, all of which point to "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1996, p. 127) or in our case, ways of being in the cyberworld.

As mentioned earlier adolescents' ways online have been researched at two levels. Studies at the macro level seek to know certain trends among the adolescent population in regard to their online practices, for example, which websites they frequent, how often and for how long, their preference over a range of activities and awareness of issues related to online use. More often than not, these parameters or variables can be quantified and statistically analysed. In contrast, studies at the micro level have a qualitative focus on smaller samples. Some of these are found in the documentation on adolescents' participation in virtual communities, as readers and writers of online posts, blogs, works of fiction and other online texts (e.g., Black, 2005; Beach & Lundell, 1998; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Knobel & Lankshear, 2002; Lam, 2000; Lewis & Fabos, 2000, 2005; Tan, 2006, in press; Thomas, 2005). Donna Alvermann (2008) in her commentary titled, "Why Bother Theorizing Adolescents' Online Literacies for Classroom Practice and Research?" argues that understanding current research linking adolescents' online

that adolescents themselves value. This will increase their engagement and time spent on the texts and bring about a significant impact on school achievement.

The micro level studies below, by no means exhaustive, present different modes of online literacies across diverse settings. Guzzetti & Gamboa (2005) investigated the online journaling of two adolescent girls who interacted in the virtual community and wrote various forms of electronic texts via Live Journal, a particularly powerful blogging tool. Live Journal provided the girls with not only an outlet for their views and feelings but also a chance to network with people of similar interests, build social relationships, help each other to construct their identities, improve literacy skills and even turn in work online for school use. The girls themselves felt that teachers should make their students aware of online resources to support classroom teaching and learning.

In another study, Lewis & Fabos (2005) examined the practice of instant messaging, another engaging form of online communication among adolescents. Through the rich data yielded by seven participants, Lewis & Fabos found that young people carry out meaningful interactions online, using appropriate conventions with particular audiences. In the process of managing their social networks online, social identities are dynamically constructed. By highlighting the distinction between social identities privileged within school literacy practices and those within IM practices, Lewis & Fabos stressed the need “to apply to school settings the literacy *practices* we observed young people take up with a great deal of engagement” (p. 496, emphasis in original).

Knobel & Lankshear (2002) found some adolescent writers publishing zines, “a do-it-yourself (DIY) countercultural form” (p. 165) that contrasted with conventional writing in terms of themes explored and readership. While not condoning this form of

(re)construction and power relationships. The online exchanges showed tech-savvy boys sparring in a display of wit and an understanding of ground rules. This form of computer mediated communication (CMC) was meaningful, effective and engaging, with no trace of inhibition or concern over a lack of language skills. Their use of the English hybrid shows the adolescents' ownership of a social language within which they constructed their preferred identities. Acknowledging its use (Lin & Luk, 2005) is a first step towards improving the learners' command of English for school.

As highlighted above both macro and micro level studies are relevant and yield interesting findings for different groups of people.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The main instrument for this descriptive and exploratory study was a questionnaire to profile web-users in terms of their Internet activities. The questionnaire was adapted from that used by Livingstone & Bober (2004) on the online experiences of children in the UK. The aspects of interest discussed in the present paper were frequency and duration of Internet activities, students' interests and websites accessed. The questionnaire was piloted with 54 Form 4 (year 10) students in an urban co-educational secondary school in Penang. Preliminary findings were presented in an international conference organized by MELTA (Malaysian English Language Teachers' Association) (see Tan, Ng & Saw, 2008) and the questionnaire consolidated for the main study.

For the main study five urban secondary schools in Penang were chosen at random to participate in the study. The criteria for selection were basically location, willingness of the school to participate and a fair representation of girls and boys. The schools that participated consisted of two boys' and three girls' schools. The

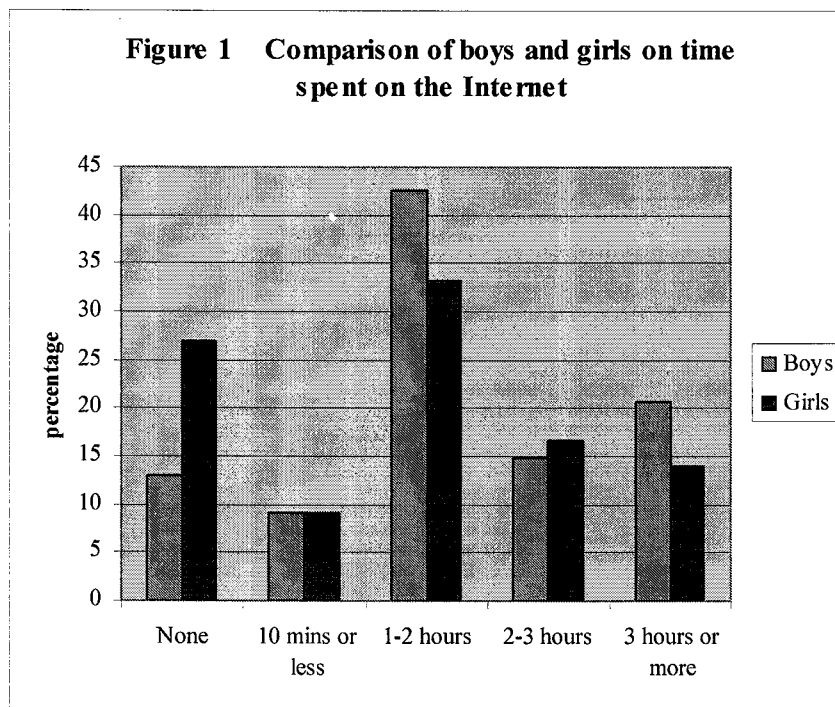
But many Malaysians are of the opinion that the 'A' which is only recognized locally, gives a false sense of accomplishment and serves to encourage complacency and mediocrity (Tan & Miller, 2007). Nevertheless, with English as the second or third language and operating at this level of proficiency in English, the participants' use of English on the Internet was significant. The findings showed that 77.06% of online activities was conducted in English, 8.16% in Bahasa Malaysia (the National Language) and 14.72% in Chinese.

4.1 Internet Access

The usual ways of accessing the Internet were using facilities at home (46.7%), Internet cafes (14.0%), someone else's house (10.8%), school (8.9%) and mobile phones (7.9%). The percentage of responses for using Internet facilities in school was rather low. Schools were equipped with computer laboratories but lessons were confined to teaching how to use the technology rather than integrating the lesson topic with Internet resources. Students were not allowed to use the computer labs or resource rooms unsupervised. One of the schools provided Internet services in the library and the students here said that they used these either during free periods or before/after school for homework and project purposes. While many of the participants (52.7%) have been linked to the Internet for more than 4 years, 9.5% (or 51 students) did not have Internet access at all at home. These probably made up part of the percentage of students using Internet facilities outside their home, as indicated earlier.

Table 2 Time spent online according to gender

	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
None	12.9	26.9
About 10 minutes or less	9.2	9.1
About 1 to 2 hours	42.6	33.3
About 2 to 3 hours	14.7	16.7
About 3 hours or more	20.6	14
Total	100	100



As shown in Figure 1, differences can be seen at the two extreme ends and at the centre. The percentage of girls not going online at all is about twice that of boys while the percentage of boys spending '3 hours or more' online is about 6% more than that of girls. In addition, the percentage of boys staying online for 1-2 hours exceeds that of girls. Overall the boys in this study spent more time on the Internet compared to the girls. One explanation could be the differing types and nature of activities enjoyed by these two groups of adolescents. This will be discussed in a later section.

the adolescents were kept updated on movies, music and celebrity news. These sites were frequented more by girls than boys who seemed to prefer online games and sports sites.

A fairly popular site for both groups was their own blogpages. In our informal conversations with a number of participants, they considered their page on *Friendster*, a global social networking site, a form of blogpage where they read about new members and wrote introductions or 'testimonials' for their buddies. In this way they could expand their circle of friends, most of whom were secondary school students in Penang. Other sites include anime and manga sites which entertained both boys and girls with stories online. While more boys accessed sports and threaded discussion groups, more girls accessed sites providing examination guides.

On the whole the participants' preferences were skewed towards entertainment and away from more serious or critical issues such as opinions and complaints about Malaysian affairs. At the end of this part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to supply the addresses of or links to the websites that they frequented. A survey of these URLs revealed similar trends. Some examples are www.limewire.com (download music or songs), www.onemanga.com, www.crunchyroll.com (watch anime series) www.tmz.com (read news on celebrities), www.soccernet.com, www.bigfishgames.com, www.facebook.com, www.youtube.com and www.wikipedia.com. The above findings on websites are complemented by the input on regular online activities in the following section.

chat simultaneously. Via *MSN Messenger*, a favourite program among the adolescents, short messages were exchanged in real time. The participants related that when they went online their presence was immediately detected by their buddies who might invite them for a chat. Sometimes when someone had not responded for a while, the partner might signal and 'nudge' persistently to get her/him back into the conversation. Other than chat, the participants also used emails. This mainly involved forwarding chain letters and sending links to their friends. In addition, as reflected in the data on websites frequented, the Internet was very important in the domain of entertainment. The main activities were downloading of music or movies and watching movies or video clips.

As a source of information, the Internet proved to be essential to the adolescents. Figure 3 above shows the participants sourcing for information on, for example, events in the local scene, announcements, education and careers, courses, news and products. Other than these areas stated in the questionnaire, the participants also used the Internet to obtain information on 'other things.' While it was unfortunate that we did not obtain details on what they meant, it showed us that the amount of information which interested the adolescents was incredibly large and extensive.

The activities in Figure 3 above constitute digital literacies. Other than possessing the normal language skills of reading and writing, the Internet user needs to have a certain level of technological skills to maneuver in cyber space and to make sense of the myriad of information, presented in various media as well as supported and expanded with hyperlinks. From their online activities, we can deduce that the participants were not lacking in such technological skills. However if we look in greater detail into the nature of the activities, we find that the participants were actively receiving (reading and

adolescents' resourceful and tactical approaches to cope with school the Malaysian way. A cause for concern is, through it all, the issue of plagiarism was not addressed.

With the activities centering mainly on entertainment and bonding with friends or members of interest groups, it is very likely that the majority of the participants were not using the Internet in a critical way. Reading seemed to be confined to obtaining explicit information. Blogging was more on personal events. From a survey of their URLs there was hardly any indication that the adolescents were using the Internet as a platform to voice their opinions about some of the social issues affecting the Malaysian public or the world.

A further interesting point to note about these online activities is that they do not appeal to boys and girls alike. More boys played online games, visited sports sites and read online news. Female-dominated activities consist of doing school work, sourcing information on education and careers and surveying or buying products online. In addition, more girls wrote introductions or testimonials for their friends' profiles online. Through their preferences we can see the construction of male and female adolescent identities. Boys seemed to enjoy challenging others in competitive online games where they were constantly taking risks. Girls were engaged in more supportive and collaborative work like contributing to a friend's profile to help her get more buddies. This was also found by Davies (1998) in her observation of Year 9 girls' and boys' talk in their English lessons while attending to authentic language tasks in a group. Both the boys and the girls in the single-sex discussion groups created group solidarity and identity but they did so through different means. While the girls tried to engage and support each other in collaborative work and often spoke "with one voice," the boys

that the adolescents used the Internet predominantly as an entertainment source as well as a virtual meeting place for the exchange of instant, short and light-hearted messages.

While there are many findings worthy of discussion we would like to focus on the following concerns which have direct relevance to the English teacher.

- a. The adolescents acknowledged the Internet as a fantastic source of information and were quick to access and download information for use in school projects. It is highly likely that they were generally not critical over information posted online. Therefore teachers should caution students not only about using sites such as *Wikipedia* as an authoritative academic source but also about taking information wholesale without acknowledging the source and its rightful owner. Plagiarism can be avoided if teachers do the forewarning early in school and teach a responsible as well as honest way of using information freely available online.
- b. Productive work in the English language, in the form of sustained writing, was somewhat limited. The receptive skills of reading and listening were more apparent in the online activities of the adolescents. If the teacher has set up a class discussion group online for either synchronous or asynchronous discussion of school work, then she/he should model longer turns to encourage learners to post longer pieces of writing resembling school-based texts. The teacher can set tasks that require longer posts to provide the opportunity for learners to move beyond short instant messages to school writing.
- c. To function as netizens the adolescents basically used skills not taught in the ESL classroom. Probably from accessing the Internet frequently and regular encounters with fellow netizens they have been socialized into the discourses on

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