THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY ABILITIES IN WRITING IN A WEB-BASED ASYNCHRONOUS PEER FEEDBACK (WAPF) LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MOE   Ministry of Education

MOHE   Ministry of Higher Education

NEB   National Education Blueprint

MEB   Malaysia Education Blueprint

PEMANDU   The Performance and Delivery Unit

UNESCO   The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

OECD   Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

PISA   Programme for International Student Assessment

TIMMS   Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

HIL   Higher Institute of Learning

ZPD   zone of proximal development

WAPF   web-based asynchronous peer feedback

ICT   information and communication technologies

L1   language one

L2   language two

Intv.   interview

JE   journal entry

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS & SEMINARS

PUBLICATION

Rohaya Abdullah (2011), Types of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback (WAPF) in Developing Writing Skills among Undergraduate Students. *EDUCARE: International Journal for Educational Studies*, 3(2) : 195-204.

SEMINARS

Rohaya Abdullah (2009). The types of web-based asynchronous peer feedback in developing writing skills among undergraduate students. Proceedings of International Conference on Educational Research and Practice (ICERP 2009) Hotel Marriot, Putrajaya, 1 June.

Rohaya Abdullah (2011). Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback (WAPF) and Learner Autonomy in Writing. Proceedings of Language & Education Conference (LEC 2011), Islamic Science University of Malaysia, 23-24 Nov.

PERKEMBANGAN KEUPAYAAN OTONOMI PELAJAR DALAM BIDANG PENULISAN DALAM SUASANA PEMBELAJARAN YANG MENGGUNAKAN RESPONS RAKAN SEKUMPULAN DI ATAS TALIAN TIDAK SEGERAK (WAPF).

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengikuti perkembangan keupayaan otonomi pelajar dalam bidang penulisan dengan bantuan respons rakan sekumpulan di atas talian tidak segerak (WAPF). Keupayaan otonomi pelajar dalam kajian ini merujuk kepada keupayaan pelajar untuk merefleksi dan menilai, dalam merancang dan membuat keputusan untuk memperbaiki penulisan mereka. Sepuluh orang responden telah terlibat dalam kajian kualitatif interpretif ini. Tujuh daripada mereka adalah responden perempuan dari Program Berkembar Institut Pendidkan Guru dan sebuah universiti awam di utara Malaysia, dua orang lagi dari universiti awam lain di utara Malaysia dan seorang responden lelaki dari universiti awam di selatan Malaysia. Data diperolehi daripada temu-ramah, penulisan jurnal, esei dan transkrip respons rakan sekumpulan. Kesemua data telah dibanding untuk melihat kesamaan dan perbezaan yang wujud. Data dianalisis dengan kaedah 'content analysis' dan diintepretasi dengan sewajarnya. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan terdapat tiga jenis respons rakan sekumpulan di atas talian tidak segerak (WAPF) iaitu WAPF sosial, afektif dan kognitif. Semasa memberi respons tersebut, rakan sekumpulan ini telah memainkan peranan dalam menjaring hubungan komuniti pembelajaran, memberi semangat, memantau serta merancah pembelajaran. Keupayaan otonomi pelajar dalam penulisan yang timbul dalam kajian ialah keupayaan refleksi, membuat keputusan serta memperbaiki penulisan. Kajian juga mendapati bahawa keupayaan otonomi pelajar dalam penulisan dapat dibangunkan dalam dua fasa. Dalam fasa-fasa tersebut, responden telah mula-mula menerima bantuan respons ke atas penulisan daripada rakan sekumpulan, kemudian mereka telah membuat refleksi terhadap respons yang diperolehi dan juga penulisan mereka, berikutnya mereka telah membuat perancangan dan keputusan dan akhir sekali mereka telah memperbaiki penulisan mereaka. Dengan evidens yang telah dipaparkan, jelas bahawa keupayaan otonomi pelajar dalam penulisan dapat dibangunkan melalui respons rakan sekumpulan di atas talian tidak segerak.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY ABILITIES IN WRITING IN A WEB-BASED ASYNCHRONOUS PEER FEEDBACK (WAPF) LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

ABSTRACT

This study explored the development of learner autonomy abilities in writing via web-based asynchronous peer feedback (WAPF). Learner autonomy abilities in this study refer to the learners' abilities to reflect and evaluate their written essays in planning and deciding the best arguments to revise their essays. Ten respondents were involved in this interpretive qualitative research. Seven female respondents were from a Twinning Programme between a Teacher's Training Institute and a public university in the north of Malaysia, two female respondents from another public university in the north of Malaysia and one male respondent from a public university from the south of Malaysia. The data were collected from interviews, journal entries, essay drafts and feedback transcripts. All data were consistently compared and contrasted to yield an exhaustive analysis. The data were analyzed using content analysis and interpreted accordingly. The findings disclosed that there were three types of WAPF delivered by the peers. They were Social, Affective and Cognitive WAPF. In relaying the WAPF, the peers played certain roles: establishing e-learning community, motivating, monitoring and scaffolding in ensuring the success of learning. The learner autonomy abilities that emerged from this study were reflection, decision-making and revision. It was also found that the learner autonomy abilities were developed at two phases. During those two phases, the respondents first received external assistance from their peers (WAPF) on their essays, then they reflected on the WAPF, next they planned and make decisions and lastly they revised their essays. With the above evidences, it is clear that the respondents in this study were able to develop their autonomy abilities in writing through the WAPF. Ultimately, the respondents were able to reflect, decide and revise better in their writing.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0   Introduction

Malaysia is a country with a big dream. In her efforts to realize the dream, she has envisaged Vision 2020 that was pioneered by the government under the flagship of the Fourth Prime Minister: Tun Dr. Mahathir Muhammad. The ultimate mission of Vision 2020 is for Malaysia to be a full-fledged developed industrialized nation by the year 2020 utilizing its own authentic paradigm. Since its first inception in 1991, Malaysia has undergone enormous reforms. Navigating on nine identified challenges, education is one of the main resources engineered to achieve the great aspiration. In its course to actualizing the aspiration, the education system experiences necessary revamps. In the process of change, The National Philosophy of Education's goal to produce a balanced and harmonious society in the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects is strongly upheld.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) are responsible to conceptualize the nation's vision into the education realm. Each body has materialized its own agenda in line with Vision 2020.

Education in Malaysian schools under MOE has undergone numerous restructurings since 1957. Each restructuring has its own identity and merits for the betterment of knowledge. Among the recent reforms were the four year plan: 'Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan 2006-2010' or The National Education Blueprint 2006-2010 (NEB) and the thirteen year plan: 'Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan 2013 -2025 or The National Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 (MEB).

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The National Education Blueprint 2006-2010 (2006) was enforced to continue supporting the nation's aspiration. In this Blueprint the focus was to develop world class education system by producing world class Human Capitals (Modal Insan) equipped with creative and critical thinking, problem solving skills, able to create new opportunities, withstand and compete with the challenges in the global arena. This Blueprint was then succeeded by the nine year plan.

Prior to developing its new National Education Blueprint: 'Pelan Strategik Interim Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia 2011-2020', in the year 2011, Malaysia witnessed a revolutionary undertaking by The Ministry of Education of Malaysia (Preliminary Report- Malaysia Education Blueprint 2011-2035, 2012). Within a period of eleven months, taking 50 000 participants from Ministry officials, teachers, principals, parents, students, and members of the public across Malaysia, an extensive research was conducted. The government also worked with government agencies like The Performance Management and Delivery Unity (PEMANDU). To provide an abreast and independent review of the findings, The Ministry engaged twelve education experts from Malaysia's profound universities and four international experts from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Bank and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The widespread study reported an alarming concern for Malaysia. In its performance against international standards, via Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assessments, Malaysian students were ranked 'in the bottom third of 74 participating countries, below the international and OECD average standard' in PISA 2009 and below the international average in both Mathematics and Science' in TIMSS 2007 (Preliminary Report- Malaysia Education Blueprint 2011-2035, 2012). PISA's 'focus is not on curriculum content, but on students' ability to apply their knowledge in real-world settings'. It is carried out every three years. TIMSS, conducted

every four years, assesses 'two aspects: content such as algebra and geometry, and cognitive skills, namely the thinking processes of knowing, applying, and reasoning. The focus age group for PISA is 15 year olds and TIMMS is 14 year olds.

Another report in 2008 revealed that Malaysia, despite the monetary spending on each individual learner at USD3000, fared poorly in the Country Performance In International Assessments Relative To Public Spend Per Student (SOURCE: World Bank EdStats: IMF: UNESCO: PISA 2009+, TIMSS 2007: PIRLS 2006: Global Insight: McKinsey & Company, in Preliminary Report- Malaysia Education Blueprint 2011-2035, 2012). As compared to its neighbouring countries, Malaysia has a considerable lesson to observe. Thailand, who spent less on its individual student (USD 1000-2000) scored higher than Malaysia. Philipines and Indonesia who spent only between USD 0 – 1000 performed at par or very close to Malaysia. Thailand had the mean score of 430, whilst Philipines scored 410 and Indonesia scored 380. In comparison, Malaysia only obtained 410. Singapore, ranked in the Great Zone, scored 540.

Apart from the weaknesses, Malaysian students taught by the same curriculum proved to possess the capabilities to excel at global level. Malaysia has 66 High Performing Schools throughout the country with outstanding steadfast performances academically and non-academically. Learners from these schools are capable to compete at international levels. International rewards gained for various achievements as recorded between 2009-2012 evidenced the high capacities of Malaysian students as well (SOURCE: Educational Policy, Planning and Research Division, Sports Division, in Preliminary Report- Malaysia Education Blueprint 2011-2035, 2012).

Taking every aspect of the findings into consideration, the research culminated in the documentation of the thirteen year plan: 'Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan 2013 – 2025' (2013) or Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB). The thrust of this Blueprint founded on the belief that every learner has the possibility to succeed. Thus, the mission of the current Blueprint is to develop the potentials of each learner through a quality education. This Blueprint specified successful individuals to possess knowledge, thinking skills, leadership skills, bilingual proficiency, ethics and spirituality and national identity. Fourteen strategies are laid out to materialize the mission. Among others, the curriculum faces another round of reform. The Blueprint prepares the individuals to face the challenges of the 21st century which is very much needed to accomplish Vision 2020, the national's aspiration to gain the global recognition as a developed nation.

In the mean time, The Ministry of Higher Education who worked closely with The Ministry of Education in realizing Vision 2020, developed The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) for the public as well as private universities in the year 2006. Its vision is to produce Human Capitals who are knowledgeable and skillful, possessing profound personalities (The National Higher Education Strategic Plan, 2006). The NHESP was formulated with the mission of transforming Malaysia as an international hub of excellence in higher education. Operationalizing within the parameter of optimizing the quality of higher education, seven areas were identified as the main thrusts of the NHESP. The seven thrusts were i) widening of access and increasing equity, ii) improving the quality of teaching and learning, iii) enhancing research and innovation, iv) empowering the Institution of Higher Education, intensifying internalization, v) enculturing lifelong learning and vi) reinforcing delivery system of MOHE.

In the same year, MOHE designed a module to be administered in the universities, particularly with the objective to generate graduates with soft skills that were reported lacking among the graduates from the local universities (Ministry of Higher Education, 2006). Aside from the subject matter knowledge that has to be mastered, university graduates also have to acquire soft skills. These skills are also known as transferable skills or employability skills. The module: Development of soft skills module for Institutions of Higher Learning specified seven elements of soft skills that are relevant to the local context : i) communicative skills ii) thinking and problem solving skills   iii) team workforce vi) lifelong learning and information management v) entrepreneurial skill vi) ethics, morals and professionalism skills vii) leadership skills (Ministry of Higher Education, 2006, pp.1-2).

In 2014, an investigation on the progress of the 1st Phase of NHESP was conducted by a team of researchers. The report revealed that the execution of NHESP is successful in all seven thrusts. Nonetheless, the team cautioned that the progress does not surpass the international standard. The quality, infrastructure, human resources and fundings are found to be inadequate to lead the nation's higher education to an advanced level to achieve the NHESP's targets (Review of National Higher Education Strategic Plan, 2014). Thus, the panel of researchers with the assistance of international experts, have identified seven critical initiatives to be injected into the present NHESP to ascertain the success of the strategic plan. The seven critical iniatives are i) Malaysian University Selection Inventory   ii) Income Contigent Loan iii) Think Broadly iv) National Research Consortium for Inclusive Growth   v) Higher Education Funding Commission vi) South-South Talent Capital vii) The New Malaysian Higher Education Act (Review of National Higher Education Strategic Plan, 2014, pp. 261- 283).

The third review: Think Broadly is a domain that is continued from the MEB (2013). Nevertheless, the critical thinking aspect in the Review of NHESP (2014) is broadened to be thinking in perspective. The main aim for this review is to nurture higher order thinking among

university undergraduates in order for them to function as capable human capitals in the job markets possessing world class intellects. There are three facets of Think Broadly, specified by the review, namely i) critical and creative thinking in which focuses on analytical thinking, ii) design thinking, specifically on newness and value, iii) perseptual thinking which concentrates on action, practicality and value (Review of National Higher Education Strategic Plan, 2014, pp. 268- 271).

1.1 Background of study

To meet such demanding goals as specified in the MEB (2013) and the NHESP (2006) and the Review of NHESP (2014), it is imperative that each individual needs to build certain distinctive characters highly resilient to the globalization and liberation challenges especially on the robust transfer of ideas and cultures that could possibly debilitate the process of molding the desired human capital.

Amongst the distinctive character traits that could assist in the nation building is learner autonomy (Ranjit, 2008; Ranjit & Gurnam, 2010; Thang, 2005; Osman, 2006). Learners need to be autonomous as becoming one has lasting invaluable outcomes. It is an attribute that equips learners with life-long skills to enable the learner to function as a responsible independent learner in the short run and as an involved member of the society in the long run.

In one of its definitions that is to 'develop a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' as advocated by Little (1991, p.4), explains the self-driven trait that one acquires by becoming autonomous. A learner with autonomy constantly executes appraisals on everyday conducts before a certain decision is made, often producing rewarding results. Essentially, a person matures by learning from his achievements and failures as the consequences of his own course of action.

In education context, learners with autonomy set their own learning targets that are more realistic. The freedom to plan learning objectives and activities creates a sense of power promoting the feelings of accountability for their learning. Along the process, they develop other good qualities that will transform them to be the 'ideal learner' (Benson, 2001). Eventually, they will blossom into confident, inquisitive, risk-taking and exploratory individuals as they withdraw further from being teacher-dependent.

Unequivocally, the best place to produce learners possessing such qualities is none other than the school. No doubt that one begins to exercise autonomy as soon as one is able to think, but the actual stage to nurture autonomy is during formal education (Holec, 1981). The dynamics of classroom interactions facilitates the development of this desired attribute. To ascertain the success of learner autonomy development, the teachers have first to understand their roles. They need to be ready to transfer their roles from teacher to facilitator gradually allowing the learners to 'grow' together on their own.

The current trend of learning however, exhibits an extension of the traditional classroom instruction with the broad use of computer related technologies and online learning (Lewis, 2013; Eneau & Develotte, 2012; Funchs, Hauck, & Muller-Hartmann, 2012; Wong, 2011: Ranjit & Gurnam, 2010; Anwar Ibrahim, 2004). Learning does not necessarily occur within the four walls of a classroom any longer.

Benson (2001) argued that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and the Internet for Language Learning have the potentials on assisting learner autonomy enhancement. While CALL paves ways for self-directed learning in which learners take control over learning when deciding on the choices over the abundant materials that it offers using 'multi-media, hypermedia and interactive technologies' (p.138), the Internet or online learning has a greater impact. The online discussion platforms create opportunities for learner interactions and collaborative learning. Knowledge construction is executed as exchanges of ideas take place ,

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hence allowing the learners to be responsible for their own learning. This indicates that online learning transfers the power of authority of the teacher to learners.

Empirical studies proved that online learning environment does support the development of learner autonomy. Eneau and Develotte (2012), found that the online learning does have positive effects on reflective and collaborative dimensions. Funchs, Hauck & Muller-Hartmann (2012) assert that learner autonomy is developed through awareness raising modes, meaning making and multi-literacy skills. In Wong's (2011) study, the learners showed awareness of their learning needs, chose learning methods and materials, revised learning activities according to their needs and made greater improvement in their writing. Adult learners with the assistance of Learning Management System (LMS) in the study carried out by Ranjit & Gurnam (2010), developed their planning, organizing, monitoring and evaluating abilities. Anwar Ibrahim (2004) posits that online resources enabled the learners in his study to take more responsibility in their learning, be more motivated and evaluative about themselves.

1.2   The statement of problem

Despite the potentials of learner autonomy in yielding the aspired nation's Human Capital, empirical studies by local researchers have shown that learners in Malaysia are not ready for learner autonomy (Ng, 2009; Thang, 2009b; Junaidah, 200; Thang & Azalina, 2007;: Thang, 2005; Thang, 2001).The studies found that university students preferred   teacher-centered approach, expecting the instructors to point their mistakes, guide and motivate tellingthem. Ng (2009) in her investigation on distance learners' learner autonomy level found that 249 distance learners in three universities in Malaysia relatively possessed low level of learner autonomy in their intentions to participate in learning. Thang, a strong proponent for learner autonomy found consistent findings in her researches on autonomy from the very start that began in 2001. The study that actually initiated her learner autonomy seeking revealed that a majority of her respondents from a local public university: UKM, favored a teacher-centered

approach to learning. An extended study in a project (IRPA), Thang and Azalina (2007), taking respondents from three local universities UKM: 255,UPM :299 and OUM: 202 corroborated the previous finding. In another study comparing three public (759 respondents) and a private university (61respondents) , Thang (2009c) claimed that generally learners from both public and private universities displayed preference for a more teacher-centered approach. However, the students in the private university proved to be inclined to become autonomous. This group, 81.8% of them, was called the 'Proautonomous Learning group or semi-autonomous.' Junaidah (2007) concluded that her distance learning respondents were not ready for autonomy as they saw the teachers as authority, goal setter, planner, test giver, progress indicator, opportunity and help provider. Above all, they perceived activities outside the classroom inconsequential.

Malaysian students in particular lack autonomy in learning due to the ~~spillover~~ backwash of the traditional teaching practice during their primary and secondary schooling phases, which often ~~emphasizes~~stresses prescriptive instructions that ~~in turn~~debilitate students' potentials. Students from such background rely too much on the teachers to make decisions (Faizah, 2004) . Sadly, teacher- centered approach continues at tertiary level as well. According to a study by Mahamood et al. (2009), 218 undergraduates in a private higher learning in Sarawak stated that the university lecturers used teacher-centered approach and student-centered approach as their teaching methods. This finding was corroborated in a qualitative study by T.Kassim, T.S., (2012). Similarly, lecturers in her study were found to combine teacher- centered approach and student - centered approach in delivering their knowledge. These data relay that learners in higher institute of learning (HIL) are still partially confined to the instructor's role as a goal setter and knowledge transmitter. The lecturers are still practising the conventional method despite the emphasis being placed on student-centered approach in the NHESP. Being in a collective society, teachers or lecturers are still perceived as the authoritative figure whose reputation is highly recognized. As a result, very often teachers or lecturers dominate the

learning process and thus restricting students' power of decision-makings. The conception that 'teachers are always right' has subjected the students to even withdraw from any attempts to deliver their stance.

Apart from the teaching method, exam-orientations in Malaysian schools are deemed to cause the over dependence on the instructor's decision-making. M. Yunus et al. (2006) argued that Malaysian university students in their study lacked the ability to solve problems due to the learning strategy that was indoctrinated in the students during their 11 years of schooling. The primary objective of the school teachers are to ensure that students under their supervisions excel in the national examinations. This practice has been going on for years. Teachers are actually not at fault because they are bound by the school's policy. Previously, every school has its yearly projection of the examination result. The result is expected to improve annually. Currently, MOE sets a Key Performance Index (KPI) of the national examinations for schools to achieve. The target is displayed on the MOE's 'Dashboard' (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2013). Hence, all schools will have to set their own KPI, aligned with the target by the ministry. They too will have to display their targets on their own Dashboards in school. Similarly, like the previous system, the targets must show yearly progress. This responsibility is then transferred to the executors: the teachers. That is why students are drilled from as young as primary school. The drilling technique as asserted by M. Yunus et al. (2006) had resulted in their respondents' incapabilities to search for diverse answers to their assigned mathematical problems. In other words, once an answer was found for that question, they would not waste time searching for other possible answers. Instead, these type of learners would equip themselves with innumerable practices on different types of questions to ace the subject. They failed to see that coming up with alternative answers would enrich their knowledge and experiences. M. Yunus et al. (2006) emphasized that their style of learning was categorized to be a habit formation that could not be undone instantly during their 3 - 4 years stay at the university.

The same scenerio exists in the learning of writing in Malaysian classrooms.Teaching writing is often teacher-centered and exam-orientated (Tan, 2006; 2005). Classroom writing is very much predicted and unnatural as it is taught not for an authentic purpose. It is on the other hand taught in line with examination requirements (Tan, 2005). Besides that, teachers often opt for Product Approach to teach writing. In this approach, teachers tend to give directive feedback to the students' essays: spelling out precisely how to unravel ambiguities of accuracy and fluency (Cho,Schunn & Charney, 2006; Cho et al., 2008). This is considered to be detrimental as this would mean that student's revisions are made based on the teacher's preoccupation, but not on their own discretion. In other words, the students do not have the freedom or autonomy to shape their own writing. Under such circumstances, the authorship of the written product is also dismissed. The loss of control over their writing would unfortunately produce learners who are receptive, killing the potentials that they originally possessed.

In a wider implication, the absence of autonomy amongst learners jeopardizes the educational policy that is moving towards sustainable learning, promoting a knowledgeable society. Thang (2005) viewed that possessing autonomy is needed beyond the school boundary as it is an attribute that is necessary for molding a society that is 'proactive, independent and responsible'. Due to constant deprivation of autonomy in conventional classrooms, it is feared that learners would not be able to apply what is learnt outside the school realm and thus would not be able to survive in the real world as high-flyer individuals. The failure in developing such students will result in the birth of a society that is inefficient in developing a nation with quality (Abdul Rahim, 2000).They would however become incompetent employees in the job markets especially in multi-national companies. This issue was evident in the complaints received from industrial sectors on the quality of our graduates who failed to make independent, accurate and prompt decisions in organizations (Rosnani, 2003). As a total effect of such work force quality, as reported by The World Bank (2005 in Thangavelu, S.M. & Guangzhou, H., 2005) Malaysia

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lagged behind Singapore, Thailand, and Korea in the productivity growth. The contributing factor to this national predicament that concerns this study was the lack of skilled laborers. Being inefficient in the English language and ICT skills were identified to be part of the cause. This finding is further strengthened by empirical evidences in Mohamad Shukri, A. H., Rafikul,. I. & Noor Hazilah, A. M. (2013), Rafikul, I., Mohamad Shukri, A. H & Noor Hazilah, A. M. (2013), Nik Hairi, O. et al., (2012), The National Employability Blueprint (2012). The studies above unanimously found that English language proficiency is the primary deterring factor for job employment for Malaysian graduates. Besides that, other employability skills like critical thinking (Mohamad Shukri, A. H., Rafikul,. I. & Noor Hazilah, A. M., 2013) and problem solving ability (The National Employability Blueprint, 2012) were reported to be lacking too. Hence, it is clear that Malaysia needs to find a way to overcome this dilemma. One highly possible way is by becoming autonomous particularly in the English language and ICT skills (Ranjit, 2008; Ranjit & Gurnam , 2010; Thang, 2006; Osman, 2006) as it warrants learners essential life skills to plan and execute goals with confidence, to consistently evaluate and reflect upon their own work in the effort to thrive as significant others contributing as proficient human capitals not only in their state country but also at international levels.

Seeing the mismatch between the desired Human Capitals and the alarming outcomes of teacher centeredness, it is paramount that learners be given flexibility to practise autonomy in their learning. Thus, Malaysia needs more researches, in any field of study, to uncover proper techniques to develop learner autonomy amongst the learners in order for others to emulate and gain benefits. As English language and ICT were determined to be the stumbling block for Malaysian graduates to seek employment, it is crucial that studies on learner autonomy abilities be given priority to learning English language and ICT. However, since learner autonomy is a new field of study in this nation, it lacks empirical researches particularly in learning English context as compared to the studies abroad, despite the fact that in the past nine years the number

of national researches conducted on learner autonomy has increased substantially. Among the current studies are Normah & Alauyah (2012), Ranjit & Gurnam (2010), Nambiar (2009), Gurnam (2009), Ranjit (2008) Marimuthu (2007), Osman (2006), Ng (2005), Ahmad et al., (2004), Norlida et al., (2003) and Gurnam (2000). From the studies, only two focused on writing: Ahmad et al., (2004) and Norlida et al., (2003) and four studies on ICT and internet: Ranjit & Gurnam (2010), Ranjit (2008), Marimuthu (2007) and Osman (2006) . Evidently, there is no study that combined writing and online learning. Thus, this study is hoped to fill this gap of knowledge by focusing on developing learner autonomy abilities in writing in a web-based asynchronous learning environment. This area of research was chosen because the researcher believes in the significance that it can offer. Not only does it support learner-centered learning but the learning environment also has the potential to augment writing skills and learner autonomy abilities in writing. Writing skill was chosen as the focus of study because writing involves an intricate thinking process that allows learners to build their learner autonomy abilities as propagated by Little (1991): 'develop the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action'.

Online (synchronous or asynchronous) peer feedback is capable of facilitating the development of learner autonomy abilities in writing as proven by these studies: Yu & Wu, (2013), Lu & Law (2011), Motallebzadeh & Amirabadi (2011), Chen et al., (2011), Miyazoe & Anderson (2010), Yang (2010), Dippold, (2009), Hui & Shih (2009), Xie, Ke & Sharma, (2008) and Ertmer et al., (2007). Observing the prospectives of online peer feedback as proven in the foreign studies above, namely in developing the respondents' abilities to evaluate and make decisions on the changes of their essays, the researcher would like to investigate whether online (asynchronous) peer feedback is able to contribute to learner autonomy abilities in writing among the learners in the local context.

1.3 The objectives of the study

This interpretive qualitative study intended to investigate whether the web-based asynchronous peer feedback (WAPF) was capable of assisting the development of the learner autonomy abilities in writing of the respondents in this study. Another objective was to find out how did the WAPF assist in developing the respondents' learner autonomy abilities in writing. To provide answers to this question, several research questions were formulated.

1.4 The research questions

a) What were the types of WAPF that assisted in developing the learner autonomy abilities in writing among the respondents?

b) What were the roles played by the peers in developing the learner autonomy abilities in writing among the respondents?

c) What were the learner autonomy abilities in writing that were developed in this study?

d) How did the WAPF assist in developing the learner autonomy abilities in writing among the respondents?

1.5 The significance of the study

This study attempts to illumine the importance of learner autonomy abilities in writing specifically through a web-based asynchronous peer feedback learning environment. The findings would be significant for a number of stakeholders namely the learners, teachers, and The Ministry of Education The Ministry of Higher Education. It would also be useful for the body of knowledge and further research.

Possessing autonomy in learning is vital for learners. Having gone through the learning process, the learners should experience a strong sense of power or autonomy in determining the presentation of their essays. The learner-centered focus would not confine the learners to the teacher's paradigm anymore. This acquired skill would later be diversified in other expects of their lives. The autonomy abilities would churn them to self-train and become reflective thinkers, practicing continuous conscientious planning in everyday life contributing well to society at large.

As the study was carried out among pre-service teachers, the positive findings would be practical when they become teachers soon. The trainees could apply the learner-centered approach in any subject to promote learner autonomy abilities, particularly optimizing on online learning approach, on their students after experiencing the meaningful learning process themselves. In a more significant impact, this would help in generating autonomous students who are responsible for their learning in and out of school.

This study is also purposeful for school teachers and university lecturers in the knowledge as well as pedagogical aspects. In the knowledge aspect, the study helps to create awareness of the negative consequences of conventional teaching strategy that overstresses on exam orientations. It is apparent that the nation is suffering from inadequacy of competent workers (Rosnani & Suhaila, 2003) and non-versatile students who are over-reliant on teachers' instructions (Junainah, 2007). Hence, teachers and lecturers must realize that there are more important education targets that need immediate attention.

In the pedagogical aspect, this study highlights that there is a dire need for the teachers and lecturers to move away from the 'spoon-feeding' teaching styles and move on to learner-centered approach that would help to establish learner autonomy among the students. Unless autonomy is given to the learners in their learning process, the aspired Human Capitals as

outlined in the MEB (2013), NHESP (2006) and the Review of NHESP (2014) could not be materialized.

This study is also hoped to disseminate crucial information to the MOE and MOHE on the need to emphasize on learner autonomy. Although learner autonomy is potentially capable of realizing the educational philosophies, it is not highlighted as one of the main areas of concern in the curriculum like critical and creative thinking in neither the MEB or NHESP. In the English secondary school curriculum (2000) particularly, learner autonomy is only made implicit that is to produce responsible learners. Meanwhile, autonomy is only focused on administrative level in the NHESP not on student level. Due to the lack of emphasis, learner autonomy seems marginalized. Therefore, the researcher feels that the MOE and MOHE should place greater concern for learner autonomy in the curriculum across disciplines.

The study could also contribute to the body of knowledge especially for the local context. When compared to the enormous amount of international studies on learner autonomy (Benson, 2006), Malaysia is left behind. Since the advantages of learner autonomy is far-reaching, the findings of this study would contribute significantly by highlighting issues that evolve in the development of autonomy experienced in an asnchronous web-based environment. This would also instigate further research to enrich the understanding of learner autonomy in other fields.

1.6   The conceptual framework of study

The fundamental of this study rooted from Social Constructivist Theory. A comprehensive literature presentation of the conceptual framework is discussed at length in Chapter 2. This section entails a brief description of the domains of social constructivism: socialization, support, scaffolding and collaboration and other related issues: process writing, peer feedback, and web-based learning environment in conjunction with the development of learner autonomy abilities in writing.

1.6.1   Social Constructivist Theory

Social Constructivist Theory that governed the study supports the development of learner autonomy in writing by engaging the potentials of the more capable peers. The key concept of this theory is socialization. Vygotsky (1978), the founder of Social Constructivist theory strongly believes that learning takes place in social interactions. It also depicts that learning does not occur in isolation.

Vygotksky (1978) asserted that there are two phases of cognitive development. The first refers to Actual Development while the second: Proximal Development or better recognized as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).   When a learner has acquired something, he has achieved the Actual Development but Vygotsky believes that the learner has the potential to extend his knowledge in the ZPD. The learner in reality is still in the state of learning in the Actual Development phase.

Vygotsky emphasized that ZPD is a more desired level of development. This level can be achieved by socializing with the society, company or group who are more competent. The members of the society who are more competent or what Vygotsky termed as 'more capable others', can be peers, teachers, parents or other knowledgeable individuals. They model the set of principles, decorum, virtues, skills or concepts that would eventually be acquired by the learner.

The enhancement by the more capable others is known as support or scaffolding. Its purpose is beyond helping the learner to understand certain concepts but more so to lead him or her towards independence. The scaffolding would provide necessary skills that are useful for later application in real life context. Good scaffolding provides the learners with high challenging activities and strong moral and cognitive support. Nevertheless, this scaffold is only

temporary. It will slowly be taken away when the learners portray an improvement in their performance. In other words, the scaffold will slowly diminish when the learner is ready to work individually.

In this study, the socialization process was evident in the writing process in a web-based asynchronous learning environment. The peers collaborated to scaffold or support each other's essays through feedback activities. In this collaboration, learners capitalized on their knowledge gain from the social interactions that took place between them. It was during this learning process, learner autonomy in writing was developed.

1.6.2   Adult Learning Theory

A secondary theory that became the baseline for this study was Adult Learning Theory. This theory proposed the attributes or dispositions of adult learners in gaining knowledge. Generated by Knowles (1980), this theory contends that adult learners approach learning differently than children. With age, adult learners are seen to be self-directed. Their prior experiences and knowledge are utilized in the learning proses thus learning becomes meaningful. Adult learners seek knowledge for the purpose of immediate achievement and their orientation to learning is problem-based. Thus, the learners in this study who were in their early twenties presumably should be able to gear themselves towards the enhancement of learner autonomy abilities.

1.6.3   Process Writing Approach

One way to encourage learner autonomy in writing as suggested by Ahmad et. al, (2004) is through Process Writing Approach where learning is learner-centered. The succeeding discussion will present the concept of this approach.

In a Process Writing Approach, learners produce a three draft essay: first, second and final draft. In a typical Process Writing instruction, learners brainstorm for ideas, outline the content, draft the essay, organize, rewrite and edit the text (Jun Liu & Hansen, 2002).This approach emphasizes on the process rather than product of learning. Essay writers have the opportunity to improve or revise their essays twice. The final draft or the final product is where the essay is graded. This is believed to be a more meaningful way of learning as compared to Product Writing Approach where learners are evaluated on only one product of writing. This type of writing approach fails to nurture good writing skills in the learners.

The revisions that the learners produce in Draft Two and Final Draft is hoped to exhibit evidence of gradual improvements in the subsequent drafts. Revision would encourage the learner to re-think, re-build, and re-connect the ideas portrayed in the essay. It not only helps the writer to see his text from another angle but also encourages the writer to be critical and analytical on his own work that he probably adores in the beginning.

According to Faigley & Witte (1984) and Becker (2006), a high level revision is global revision, in which writers make meaning changes to their essays by either adding more ideas to support their arguments or changing the whole concept of their essay by reconstructing parts or the entire essay By making such amendments, writers are able to present a more convincing essay to the audience. A lower level revision is known as surface revision. This is when writers make minor alterations like grammar, sentence construction or rephrasing. Writers do not make any meaning change to this type of revision.

1.6.4 Peer feedback

Peer is one of the capable others that is proposed by Social Constructivist Theory. Peer feedback is a learning strategy commonly used to enhance writing amongst expert (Chisholm, 1991) and novice writers of first and second language. Liu and Hansen (2002) highlight that in peer response, learners work collaboratively by exchanging ideas and improving language accuracy towards the completion of each other's essay.

The more competent peers are responsible for scaffolding the writer's revisions of the second and final draft. If they are able to contribute constructive feedback, the writer would benefit in the quality of revision (Shamsad, 2003; Noor Hanim, 2000) and development of autonomy in writing (Little, 1991; Thanasoulas, 2002).

Similar to revision, there are two types of peer feedback: surface and global (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Surface peer feedback refers to grammatical corrections whilst global peer feedback refers to content and rhetoric amendments. Surface feedback addresses issues on grammar like spelling, tenses, vocabulary and verbs. Global feedback consists of content and rhetoric feedback. Content feedback deals with supporting details that support the arguments of the essay. Lastly, rhetoric feedback focuses more on the organization of the text.

At a glance, a much preferred feedback would be global feedback. Content is vital as it is the backbone of the essay. In the meantime, rhetoric is important because it assists in the flow of arguments. However, Liu & Hansen (2002) argue that both global and surface are complementary to each other. If the essay contains major grammatical errors, the neglect of surface feedback might jeopardize the meaning and disrupt the flow of the essay. Thus, surface and global feedback need to be attended to by the peers when giving feedback.

With the fast-paced progression in virtual learning, online peer feedback is becoming a common discussion among researchers in the second language (L2) writing field. Synchronous or asynchronous peer feedback adopts similar features of traditional peer feedback whereby peers interact and collaborate among themselves to improve each other's essays. Feedback is given on the components of essay: content, organization, style or language. Online peer feedback is revealed to be beneficial as respondents improve the quality of writing (Chen, et al., 2011), make further revisions on text development, organization or style (Yang, 2010), increase intrinsic motivation (Dippold, 2009) and achieve higher learning (Ertmer, et al., 2007).

1.6.5   Web-based Asynchronous Learning Environment (Blogging)

Web-based learning is a form of internet or computer assisted learning where learning occurs online. There are two modes of communication tools for web-based learning: synchronous and asynchronous. The second mode, asynchronous is chosen for this study. In this mode, learners are not required to be online at the same time in order for learning to take place.

Web-based learning serves as a platform to motivate learners in their writing that would in turn foster autonomy. The virtual learning environment results in a number of advantages. Among them are, lowering learners' affective filter (Tuzi, 2004; Liu & Sadler, 2003), gearing learners towards independence and self-directedness (Tsui & Ng, 2000) and providing learners the opportunity to assess and revise their ideas at their convenience (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001).

Figure 1.1 displays the Conceptual Framework of the Study. It demonstrates a synthesis of the relevant literature mentioned.
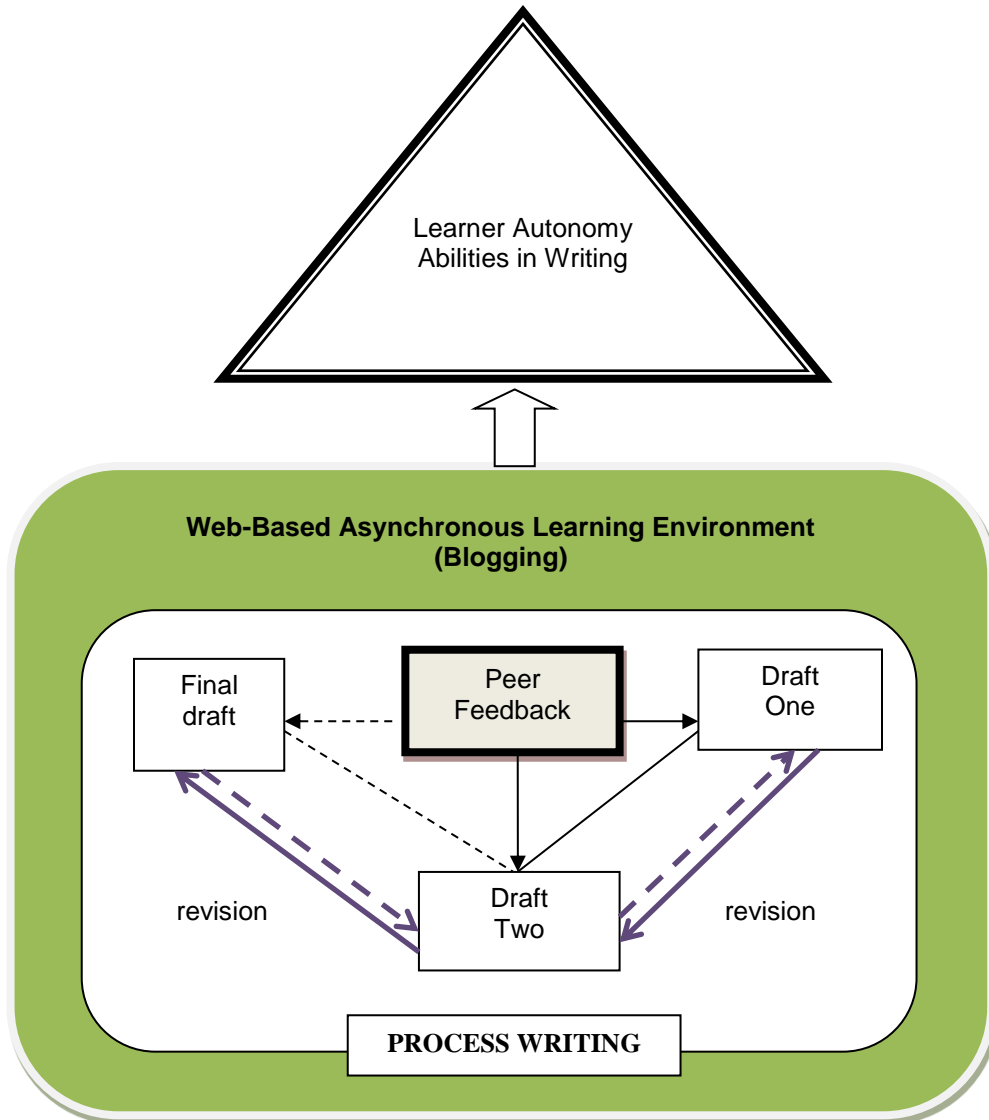

Figure 1.1: The Conceptual Framework of the Study

1.7   The limitations of the study

1.7.1   The sampling was imbalance in terms of gender. There was only one male respondent in the study against nine female respondents. This could have affected the result of the finding.

1.7.2   Communications outside the study among those respondents who lived at the same hostel could not be controlled. This might have interefered with the finding.

1.7.3   The respondents were busy with their class schedules at the time of the study. This could have affected the quality of the WAPF or their reflections, decision makings and revisions.

1.7.4   Journal entry was one of the instruments used in this study. However, the respondents did not produce sufficient data for analysis.

1.7.5   The respondents of the study were mainly from the northern part of the country. Thus, the finding could not be generalized.

1.8   The delimitations of the study

1.8.1   The study only focused on one essay topic. Due to the rigor of the study, the tendency of the respondents getting bored and losing interest was high. The one topic was decided to prevent the respondents from quitting the study.

1.8.2.   The topic of the essays for the ten respondents was not standardized. The fact that the study was on learner autonomy, the researcher did not want to inflict any form of force on the respondents.

1.8.3   The study was only focused on learner autonomy abilities in writing. This was because writing, a procedural skill, involved the thinking process that was necessary for the development of autonomy abilities in the study. Speaking,

the other procedural skill, was not chosen as it usually involved impromptu responses that requires a less thorough thinking process.

1.9   Operational definitions

1.9.1   Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy refers to the ability of the learners to reflect and evaluate their written essays in deciding the best arguments and revise their essays to convince the audience (peers) with the help from the peer feedback carried out in a virtual environment.

1.9.2   Reflection

Reflection refers to the ability to review the drafts after receiving WAPF. The respondents analyzed, evaluated and judged the suitability and relevance of the WAPF. The decision whether the WAPF was accepted or rejected was made at this stage.

1.9.3   Decision Making

Decision making refers to the ability to plan the revisions of the drafts. At this phase, the respondents acknowledged the problem, searched for alternatives, decided on alternatives and executed the action.

1.9.4   Revision

Revision refers to ability to revise the drafts. The tangible amendments or corrections made by the respondents in the second and Final Draft were made on the content, organization, style and language of the draft.

1.9.5   Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback (WAPF)

WAPF refers to the web-based asynchronous peer feedback (delayed online peer feedback) given by the peers to their counter parts on their first and second