# USING AND INTERACTING ON AN ONLINE NARRATIVE WRITING PLATFORM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY


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**PENGGUNAAN DAN INTERAKSI DI DALAM PLATFORM PENULISAN NARATIF ATAS TALIAN: SATU KAJIAN EXPLORATORI**

## ABSTRAK

Kemunculan dan perkembangan Internet yang berterusan telah menghasilkan pelbagai jenis aplikasi, sofwer dan platform yang memberi peluang kepada para pendidik dan pelajar untuk menggunakan platform bertulis yang sedia ada untuk meningkatkan kemahiran penulisan mereka. Tujuan utama kajian eksploratori ini adalah untuk menyiasat bagaimana menggunaan sesuatu platform penulisan naratif sepertimana yang ditakrifkan dalam kajian ini, dapat meningkatkan penulisan naratif pelajar. Kajian ini juga mengkaji pola interaksi dalam persekitaran pembelajaran kolaboratif dan akhirnya untuk menyiasat pengalaman dan refleksi peserta dalam penggunaan platform penulisan naratif atas talian. Kajian ini meneroka penggunaan platform penulisan naratif atas talian dalam suasana spesifik yang melibatkan enam orang pelajar dan seorang guru di sebuah Sekolah Menengah Cina di Pulau Pinang. Kaedah pengumpulan data kajian eksploratif kualitatif ini adalah tugasan bertulis, interaksi atas talian, temubual dan refleksi bertulis. Prosedur analisis data merangkumi peringkat penyediaan data dan organisasi, pengurangan data kepada tema-tema melalui proses-proses pengekodan dan penggambaran penemuan akhir telah diterima pakai. Sumber data yang pelbagai telah membolehkan proses triangulasi dijalankan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar telah meningkat keupayaan penulisan naratif mereka selepas peglibatan dalam platform penulisan naratif atas talian. Pola interaksi dianalisis mengikut kehadiran kognitif, pengajaran dan social. Kehadiran sosial menjadi satu pengalaman yang berharga untuk para pelajar kerana guru dan pelajar sentiasa mengakui dan mengambil berat ketika mereka terlibat dalam platform penulisan naratif atas talian. Bagi kehadiran pengajaran, guru memainkan peranan yang utama sebagai pakar matapelajaran dan mengarahkan perhatian pelajar kepada aspek-aspek penting dalam tugasan. Dapatan bagi kehadiran kognitif,

menunjukkan bahawa pelajar dan guru memberi dan menerima komen untuk menyumbang kepada pemikiran dan pembelajaran. Kehadiran tambahan yang berkaitan dengan kehadiran social telah dikenal pasti. Ini dipanggil sebagai kehadiran social. Penemuan-penemuan tambahan adalah berkaitan dengan kod pensuisan, berpusatkan peperiksaan, berpusatkan guru, budaya sembang, pelajar berkelakuan seperti guru dan unsur berasaskan masa. Secara keseluruhannya, penggunaan platform penulisan naratif atas talian adalah satu percubaan yang berjaya meningkatkan penulisan naratif pelajar. Penemuan kajian ini, mempunyai implikasi untuk mengajaran and pembelajaran di sekolah  dan penulisan web terutamanya di Malaysia. Adalah diharapkan kajian ini dilaksanakan di tempat lain untuk memeriksa keberkesanan platform bertulis yang diperkenalkan dalam kajian ini.

**USING AND INTERACTING ON AN ONLINE NARRATIVE WRITING PLATFORM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**


## ABSTRACT

The advent and the continued development of the Internet has given birth to a plethora of online writing apps, softwares and platforms that provide an opportunity for educators and students alike to develop and enhance their writing skill online. The main aim of this exploratory study is to investigate how the use of an online narrative writing platform as defined in this study enhances students' narrative writing. The study also investigates the patterns of interactions in a collaborative learning environment and the participants' experiences and reflections in the use of the online narrative writing platform. The study explores the use of the online narrative writing platform in a specific setting of six students and a teacher in a Chinese Secondary school in Penang. The data sources of this qualitative exploratory study are written assignments, online interactions, interviews and reflections. Qualitative data analysis procedures include stages of data preparation and organisation, data reduction into themes through coding processes and final representation of findings. The multiple sources of data enabled data triangulation process to be carried out. The findings revealed that the students improved their narrative writing ability after engaging in the online narrative writing platform. The patterns of interactions were analysed according to cognitive, teaching and social presences. The social presence showed the teacher and the students were constantly acknowledging and caring for one another. For teaching presence, the teacher played a major role as the subject matter expert and in directing the students' attention to important aspects of the task. The cognitive presence, showed that students and teacher are giving and receiving comments to contribute to thinking and learning. An additional presence related to social presence was identified. This is termed as social learning presence. The additional findings were reported on code-switching, exam-centeredness, teacher-

centeredness, chat-culture, student behaving like teacher and duration of task. Overall, the use of the online narrative writing platform was a successful attempt to improve students' narrative writing. The findings of this study, have implications for the teaching and learning of school and writing in a webbed environment, especially in Malaysia. It is hoped that the study is replicated in other settings to examine the effectiveness of the writing platform suggested in this study.

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Overview of the Study

Globalization and the technological revolution in the past two decades have created profound implications for the use of technologies in schools (Sweeny, 2010; Korma, 2005; Kellner, 2000). According to Mehlinger and Powers (2002), Information and Communication Technology (ICT) "will have, is having, has had, can have an impact on how we teach and learn" (p. 11). In this sense, ICT has caused tremendous challenges for educators to depart from the traditional teaching approaches to embrace new approaches to add value and fulfill the demand of the new generation (Lieberman & Mace, 2010; UNESCO, 2008; Vighnarajah & Abu Bakar, 2009; Pandian, 2006).

Having been raised in the technology saturated environment, students' expertise in technology is widespread. They have a different way of thinking, learning and communicating (Prensky, 2006; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Tapscott, 1998). Students prefer varied forms of communication, inquiries based approaches and are bored with conventional classroom teaching (Oblinger & Hagner, 2005). It seems that they use technology more than the face-to-face interaction (Oblinger, 2008). Obviously, there is a shift in students' learning style and students hope that technology will be integrated in the educational environment (Windham, 2005).

While students are frequently using sophisticated ICT tools, they may not necessarily be proficient in transferring information that they have gathered from cyber situation to the educational environment effectively (Klages & Clark, 2009). The current generation termed as 'Digital Natives' (Prensky, 2001) due to their

intense use of ICT are experiencing digital comfort but not information fluency (Oblinger, 2008). More precisely, 'Digital Natives' do not understand how technologies can be manipulated for the educational context (Livingstone, 2009; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). For these reasons, educators have the responsibilities to ensure that the students are able to use the digital information constructively for a meaningful learning experience.

It is essential for students and educators to be skillful enough in learning and adapting to the evolving technologies in their pedagogical practices (Thomas, 2011; Muniandy, Tan, Masood & Mohammad, 2010; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007). Teachers need to cultivate a deep level of reflection and thinking in the use of ICT in pedagogy. Learning to learn is imperative for teachers in this digital environment (Khan, 2010; Nanjappa & Grant, 2003). As such, teachers need to constantly thrive and excel with the ever-changing digital environment to facilitate learning to greater heights (Carmen, 2010; Burke, 1997).

When a new technology appears, this does not necessarily mean that it substitutes the older technologies (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). In fact, the new technologies actually add and offer a more purposeful and meaningful use in the area of technology (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). The older technologies never disappear but exist in a new paradigm (Leinonen, 2005). This is evident when the new media activities are based upon what they have acquired from the older media (Carmen, 2010). For example, the newness in the media includes the need to reconfigure, reinvent, adapt and hack ideas from the older media (Livingstone, 2006). For this reason, it appears that today's young people who have learned in the past using the then media are now able to utilize their previous knowledge using the prevailing media. Carmen (2010) defines such integration as intertextual learning. The

intertextual learning practice is prevalent in the Web 2.0 tools (refer to Section 2.2) where people are utilizing the previous skills to be employed in the new media (Harrison & Barthel, 2010). This perspective is particularly relevant in this study as the researcher taps into the merits of educational blogging and utilizes Facebook as the platform to enhance narrative writing skills. Facebook can be a good platform for writing as it is a popular social networking site for students (Cloete, Villiers & Roodt, 2009). On this basis, this study showed how intertextual learning practice occurred when the merits of educational blogging were integrated in Facebook. The principles of educational blogging have been applied in an online writing platform for teaching and learning of narrative writing. It is also supported by the constructivist theory of learning. This integration will be further explained in Section 1.1.1.

A careful planning and implementation of a pedagogical sound scheme is also needed to increase students' narrative writing ability. Writing in the virtual world is process-less: "writing becomes an act of moving from immediate composing to instant publishing" (Klages & Clark, 2009, p. 33). These authors point to the general questions: How do we teach process in a process-less world of digital media? How do we engage students and help them to value process as a necessary tool for becoming more articulate in their writing? How can we engage students so that they can navigate in both digital and traditional writing environments? How do we help students to code switch between their use of technology with friends and its use in academic and professional situations? How have the roles of teachers and students been reversed by the fact that our students are often more techno-savvy than teachers are? These questions reflect legitimate concerns on how educators should plan sound pedagogical lessons to maximize the use of ICT in teaching writing. Technologies

that are manipulating our lifestyles should be acknowledged by the teachers and given consideration in pedagogical approaches for effective teaching and learning environment (Muniandy et al., 2010). Thus, this study is planned towards this direction (detailed explanation in section 1.1.1). There is a need to explore the use of the online writing environment in teaching and learning activities in Malaysian ESL setting.

With this in mind, the present study explores how the online narrative writing platform as designed in this study is able to enhance different aspects of narrative writing. Subsequently, the emerging patterns of interactions in the online collaborative environment in the process of composing narrative writing based on the CoI model are studied. Finally, students' and teacher's online experiences and reflections are analyzed. This study is conducted in the context of an urban Chinese Secondary School in Penang within the premises of an ESL setting. The following section will elaborate on how social networking site (Facebook) can be adapted into a pedagogical writing platform.

### 1.1.1 Adapting social networking sites into a pedagogical writing platform

A myriad of social networking tools and services are very much at the vanguard indicating the evolving and pervading nature of World Wide Web (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2007). The Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, Tweeter, Google Docs and others are a list of social media sites that have changed the way people communicate using a plethora of attributes such as blogging, picture, wikis and video sharing (Davis, 2009). The new spaces and tools are used for entertainment, commerce and education (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2007).

The rapid viral growth of the social networking sites has created the assumption that social networking sites are meant for bringing new people to interact (Davis,

2007). However, research and literature seem to indicate otherwise. An exploration of literature and studies indicated that social networking sites are meant for people who have already established their relationship and are keen to continue their social networking with whom they are familiar with the offline community (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Instead of viewing these sites as a means for bringing new people together, Joinson (2008) states that people are keen in keeping touch with their acquaintances. More importantly, Ganster and Schumacher (2009) suggest that the social networking sites such as Facebook as information portals for academic purposes.

The force of all these ideas is reflected in this study. This simple writing platform to be used in this study is based on the principles of educational blogging that can be integrated in the Facebook environment. Additionally, the students in this study are familiar with each other in the classroom and the social networking site is actually providing the opportunities for practicing the narrative writing process outside of class time.

The narrative writing platform is created based on the learning theory, technology and pedagogical practices. According to Bagley and Hunter (1992) the integration of these components is termed as "synergistic relationship". Bagley and Hunter (1992) further adds that the three components mentioned above must be integrated and implemented concurrently to reap success in the teaching and learning environment.

As a step in this direction, the pedagogical practice in this study focuses on Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure. Students are further encouraged to interact and collaborate as underpinned by the constructivism theory. The use of the intertextual learning (principles of blogging and Facebook) further strengthens the

methodology, for a synergistic integration of pedagogy, learning theory and ICT tools. The three components observed and studied in this research are shown in the following diagram.

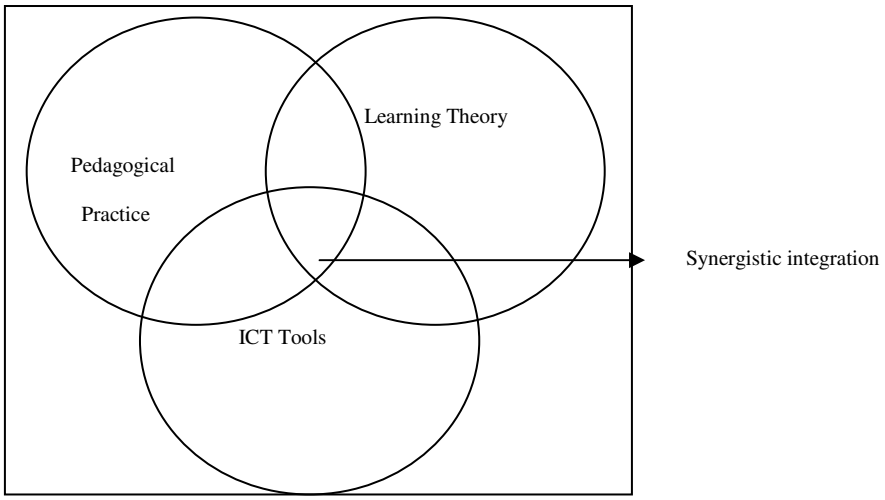


*Figure 1.1.* Synergistic relationship (Adapted from Bagley & Hunter, 1992)

It is worth noting that the Web 2.0 tools will keep evolving, For example, blogs have evolved from textual blogs and audio blogs to video blogs. Such is the evolutionary nature of the tools of technology. Even the present popular social networking tool such as Facebook will ultimately change to a newer platform. Hence, the researcher argues that, what should be the concern of the educators is how the previous pedagogical practices can be meaningful while meeting the challenges of a newer technology. This in a nutshell, points to the fact that the pedagogical applications and tools with certain elements of learning are more important than the constant preoccupation with the tools of technology (Lorenzo, Oblinger & Dziuban, 2007; Boud & Prosser, 2002; Laurillard, 2000; Mehan, 1998).

In fact, methods and instructions in a teaching and learning environment gain no advantages by employing a specific tool to deliver instruction (Clark, 2001).

Clark interestingly highlights the above idea with the analogy of a delivery truck to explain his idea on instructional tools. According to Clark (2001) instructional tools are "mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence students achievement any more that the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition" (p. 2).

Though this study uses Facebook, it is not about Facebook. This study is bringing the students to a popular networking site (Facebook) to teach them narrative writing. In this study, blogs or Facebook is not a solution for writing problems. The solution lies in effective learning based on the interdependence of the method and learning tools. Another key aspect of this study is the concept of intertextual learning. As noted earlier, intertextual learning emphasizes skills that are acquired in the previous media while participating in the newer media (Carmen, 2010). Furthermore, one medium never annihilates the previous medium but co-exist with it (Kaku, 2011). Kaku concludes that "anyone who can accurately predict the mix of these media in the future could become very wealthy" (p. 16).

This scenario provides the motivation for the present study to revisit the idea of newness by utilizing the affordances of the older tools. In this study, the older tool is blogs and the newer one is Facebook. Whether new or old tools, one common thing about these tools (Facebook and blogs) is that they are mainly focused on text making. Therefore, this study aligns pedagogical practices in the evolving nature of technology as the current social networking sites will become obsolete one day. When the new social networking sites appear, the pedagogical practices and the learning theory that are suggested in this study can be considered in a newer platform. Therefore, the social interactions, online-collaboration, and Labov and Waltezky's narrative structure employed in this study can also be used in other social

networking sites such as My Space, Google Docs, Bebo and newer platforms that may appear in future.

In this study, two hypothetical terms of tutor platform and learner platform are used in the Facebook environment. These two platforms are actually virtual spaces embedded within Facebook which are not delineated by physical virtual boundaries. They are merely used as concepts to facilitate this study. They are viewed as two types of pedagogical writing platforms. These two platforms are equivalent to Campbell's (2001) learner blog and tutor blog. Since the writing platform is created within the Facebook, the tutor blog is adapted as tutor platform and the learner blog is adapted as learner platform.

The fundamental intention of the tutor platform in this study is for the teacher to guide the students in narrative writing. The researcher asserts that students need to be guided on a systematic model of narrative writing to encourage them to write. This is consistent with Oravec's (2002) claim that students need to be scaffolded when blogging are used for educational purpose. He elaborated that it is only with such guidance that the pedagogical promise of blogs can be achieved. With the use of tutor platform the teacher controls the style and the format of their narrative writing. Following this, students are required to produce their individual essays based on the guidelines outlined in the learning platform. The essays were placed in the learner platform.

Additionally, the learner and tutor platforms were utilized to encourage collaborative learning with peers and teacher. In both the platforms, students were given the opportunity to express their opinions and comments. The comments were provided by the teacher and the peers for the students to improve on their essays. In

other words, in both the platforms, there is a joint effort between teacher and students to improve students' narrative writing.

Basically, the online narrative writing platform is to:

i. design lessons with specific objectives.
ii. demonstrate careful steps and preparation based on students' need for narrative writing.
iii. provide interactions (student-student and student-teacher) in the collaborative learning environment to improve their narrative essays.

This narrative writing platform is also based on Richardson's (2006) idea on four important things that students should consider when they are interacting online: i) reflect on what they are writing; ii) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time; iii) engage readers in communication that leads to further thinking and writing; iv) synthesize disparate learning experiences and understand their collective relationship and relevance. Teachers can post hyper links and other resources for students to improve their essays. The use of blogging principles in this study does not include the support of audio and video files.

Therefore, the online writing platform created in this study is based on two important levels of blogging: individualistic and collaborative. It is expected that online narrative writing platform which is developed based on the principles of educational blogging will be an excellent platform for social interactions characterized by collaboration that increase students' creativity, critical thinking, communication and accuracy (Sim, 2010; Raith, 2009; David, Nicholson, Jenifer & Atkins, 2008; Hsu & Comac, 2008; Godwin- Jones, 2003).

Apart from that, the social interactions are identified and categorized based on the Community of Inquiry model (2000). This model will be discussed further in Chapter 2. The patterns of interactions indicate how students cope with the problems and are able to reach consensus about their task (Rikki, Yigal & Kefaya, 2010).

## 1.2 Background of the Study

In Malaysia, the initial effort to use ICT in education is encouraged by the aspiration of the Malaysian Superhighway Corridor (MSC) and Vision 2020. Such efforts are spearheaded to position Malaysia as a fully developed nation in the digital and knowledge based-economy (Ngah & Masood, 2006). The use of ICT is further reinforced with the current National Key Result Area (NKRA) program which aims to improve students' academic performance (NKRA Pendidikan, 2010). Elaborating on the NKRA program, the Director General of the Education Ministry, urges all teachers particularly the secondary school teachers to utilize ICT in teaching as the Internet is the 'in thing' among the younger generation. Therefore, to fulfill the current needs, the catalyst to encourage the use of ICT will be the technology supported Smart Schools which use the computer as the important tool in teaching and learning (Smart School Project Team, 1997). In fact, the Smart School program which was implemented on a pilot basis between 1999-2002 was further expanded to reach 10, 000 schools by the end of 2010.

Thus, the proliferation of ICT has provided most schools in Malaysia with computers and Internet connections to enhance the learning process. At this point, it is important to stress that the use of computers and the Internet in Malaysian ESL classrooms is not new. Local researchers have also pointed out that computer assisted language learning (CALL) in the ESL classroom in Malaysia is accepted by the

English teachers and has the capability to encourage a conducive learning experience in ESL classrooms (Subarna & Wan, 2010; Yunus, 2007; Samuel & Bakar, 2007). However, what is needed is the call for renewed attention in the ever-changing world.

To gain a better understanding on this matter, there is a need to know the three stages of computer assisted language learning (CALL) which emerged since the 1970's. The first stage of CALL is the use of drill and practice activities focusing on appropriate use of language (Raith, 2009). The second stage is during the 1980's and 1990's where computers offer the communicative approach to language teaching. The last stage is the stage in which Warschauer (2004) terms as integrative CALL.

Integrative CALL which is a sub-domain of Communication Mediated Computer (CMC) includes a wide range of technologies related to writing. These include a number of synchronous or real time communications such as web-based materials, instant messaging, asynchronous and delayed communication such as e-mail (Warschauer, 2007). The use of CMC allows teachers to see CMC as not only confined to language teaching but made for social interaction in the virtual world (Raith, 2009). The Web 2.0 based materials are a collection of technological tools that promise language learning (Farmer, You & Brooks, 2008; Carr, Morrison, Cox & Deacon, 2007). This promise is based on the connectivity, interactivity and on the strong pedagogical constructivist theory (Motteram & Sharma, 2009; Alexander, 2006).

The mere existence of the Web 2.0 is not sufficient to benefit language learners (Ismail, 2012; Bower, Hedberg & Kuswara, 2010). What is pertinent is how the technologies can be used innovatively for educational purpose to benefit the

language learners (Widodo & Novavan, 2012). According to Bower, Hedberg & Kuswara (2010) there is little work on how the Web 2.0 can be utilized effectively to complement the learning demand of the curriculum. This provides the motivation for this study to create a hypothetical virtual online writing platform based on the Web 2.0 tools. The online narrative writing platform is designed by integrating the principles of blogging in the popular social networking site (Facebook environment) to teach narrative writing to the Malaysian ESL learners.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

The statement of problem will be discussed from two different aspects. They are writing difficulties and the mismatch between product writing and process writing. Good writing skills are important for students to excel academically and for career opportunities (Graham & Perin, 2007; Chow, 2007; Tribble, 1996). One of the underlying agenda of the 10$^{th}$ Malaysian blueprint (2010) is to improve the teaching of English language with a new curriculum focusing on five skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing and grammar). Writing remains as an important skill and being able to write well is definitely an added advantage for students.

Despite being an important and a frequent task, writing is widely acknowledged as a laborious and daunting task for students in school (Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh, 2005; Yong, 2006; Tribble, 1996). In the Malaysian context, Malaysian students' achievement for the writing component is still at the dissatisfactory level (Latifah & Ramli, 2010; Sarudin, Zubairi, & Ali, 2009; Darus & Ching, 2009; Puteh, Rahamat & Karim, 2009; Heng & Chan, 1996). This is evident in the poor achievement of the students in the Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (SPM), a public examination taken by the fifth year secondary school students (Puteh, Rahamat &

Karim, 2010). In this examination, the English writing component requires students to write both guided and the continuous writing. Although students have gone through the formal process of learning English for 11 years, their achievement at the school and Malaysian examinations revealed that students have not fully mastered the basic aspects of writing: i) generating ideas ii) revising iii) rewriting (Puteh, Rahmat & Karim, 2010). Students see writing as a difficult and a stressful task and more so in continuous writing (narrative, factual, expository) as it is more challenging than the directed writing (Marimuthu & Goh, 2005).

Similar skepticism is also particularly true in the Chinese Secondary Schools in Malaysia (vernacular schools). A survey conducted by The Ministry of Education has recorded the writing deficiencies of Chinese students in their SPM examination (Ministry of Education, 2008). Furthermore, a number of researchers have noted with great concern that the Chinese students (vernacular schools) have problems in expressing their ideas systematically and logically in English (Darus & Ching, 2009; David & Su, 2009; Azman, 2006; Ali & Ismail, 2006). As such, Chinese students have the preconceived idea that writing in English is not an interesting task at all.

In the current study, the researcher further corroborated the above problems of Chinese students with the Head of English panel in the school where the study is conducted. The Head of the English panel highlighted that the students in the school were not interested in writing essays. At the time of the interview the Head of the panel revealed some pertinent findings in relation to the dilemma faced by Chinese ESL students in their writing of essays. The interview revealed that the main obstacles faced by the students is that they are demotivated, lack confidence and not keen in writing particularly in English. They do not perform well in their 1119 English paper in their SPM examination. Some of the reasons highlighted by the

Head of the English panel were mother tongue interference, lack of practice and confidence. This led to the obvious disparity in students' results in SPM English subject and 1119 English subject. The difference in the results is due to their weaknesses in English Paper 1 which is related to writing skills.

The difficulties in writing may be attributed by the limited time allocated in school for students to train and immerse in the English language (Darus & Ching, 2009). The time allocated in schools is 600 minutes for English subjects and subjects taught in the Malay takes up to 920 minutes. Hence, students are more proficient in Malay language as they have more exposure to it (Darus & Ching, 2009). Furthermore, the limited time does not provide the opportunity for the teacher to personally attend to the students' needs and interest. The interactions for learning with friends and teachers are limited. It is hoped that the online narrative writing platform gives the opportunity for the online interactions and to see how these interactions enhance learning of essay writing.

Evidently, the lack of practice, time constraint, limited interactions and mother tongue interference are largely responsible for writing problems in Malaysian Chinese School (David & Su, 2009; Darus & Ching, 2009). Effective pedagogical practices are seriously lacking and have resulted in Chinese School students dropping out from schools (My Pendidikan, 2012). A survey conducted by the National Union of Teaching Profession on a total of 159 students aged 11-18 found that 38% of the students understood when the teacher teaches them in English. A total of 22% of the students understood part of it and 28% did not entirely understand the teachers' lessons conducted in English. The survey revealed that they were not keen to study because they have problems in understanding the English language (My Pendidikan, 2012). The difficulties and the problems faced by the

Chinese students should not be overlooked as the Chinese population makes up 24.6% of the Malaysian population (My Pendidikan, 2012).

Ignoring their writing problems will definitely have an impact on the development of the country. For example, they are also part of graduates who are considered restricted users of English particularly in writing (Sarudin, Zubairi, & Ali, 2009) and part of unemployed graduates in Malaysia (Latifah & Ramli, 2010).

Another reason as to why the study is being done is due to the fact that the process writing approach which is outlined by the official syllabus is often neglected in the Malaysian ESL classrooms (Mukundan, 2011; Abbas, Shahran & Che Lah, 2011; Chitravelu et al., 2005). Students are unable to organize their ideas and produce a good piece of writing due to time constraint. Likewise, teachers will also not be able to teach, comment and provide the appropriate feedback for the students to work on their essays (Yong, 2006). Thus, the teaching of writing skill is very much teacher-centered despite training and syllabus guidelines for the learner centered approach (Abbas, Shahran & Che Lah, 2011; Mukundan, 2011). The writing process is often overlooked and simplified and more importantly the teachers do not provide effective scaffolding during the process of producing a piece of writing due to time constraint.

Hence, changes in teaching approaches should be aimed at addressing our students' eroding writing skills. Since the current generation is predominantly influenced by digital communication environment there is greater urgency for teachers to integrate the new means for pedagogical purposes (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010). Evidences and literature suggest that an online writing environment can help teachers to create a conducive environment for the students to practice their writing

skills to overcome the difficulties in writing (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Baker, Rozendal & Whitenack, 2000).Writing will be less burdensome with the online platforms as teachers and students are able to interact and work at their own pace outside the classroom hours (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Baker, Rozendal & Whitenack, 2000). When students and teachers collaborate, students who are weak and have difficulties in organizing their ideas will be able to get suggestions and comments (Harwood & Blackstone, 2012; Richardson, 2009; Grosseck, 2009; Pinkman, 2005).This will eventually improve their writing and generate more ideas. With that advantage, students are expected to acquire knowledge to overcome difficulties in writing (Murray & Horrigan, 2008; Richardson, 2009; Pinkman, 2005).

All in all, there is a need to discover a systematic and effective approach to conduct lessons in line with the aims and objectives of the curriculum and at the same time to utilize ICT as an important teaching platform. The current teaching of writing approaches in the Malaysian ESL classroom must be improved. Such a situation has propelled the researcher to incorporate the online narrative writing platform to enhance narrative writing. The platform is able to provide a 'virtual third place' where students and teachers are able to join academic discussions anytime convenient to them. Writing becomes less burdensome with the use of online narrative writing platform as teachers and students are able to work together at their own pace outside the classroom hours to communicate with each other.

### 1.4 Rationale of the Study

The rationale of this study is to create an online narrative writing platform (refer to Section 2.3.1) and to explore its use as studies of this nature are not many in the Malaysian context (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010). According to Mahadi and Uaidullah (2010) the use of social networking sites in education should be

considered in the Malaysian school settings. As noted earlier, getting students to be interested in writing is an arduous task. One manner to get them interested in writing is by providing a virtual "third place" where students have the opportunity to write outside the classroom at their own pace and whenever it is convenient to them(Jones, 2012). Students become more tolerant with their imperfect writing with the use of online writing environment as they are able to revise, edit, delete and paste their writing easily (Minocha & Robert, 2008; Richardson, 2006). Moreover, they are thrilled and energized if they are able to work collaboratively (Oblinger & Hagner, 2005).

Therefore, an investigation on how social networking sites can be utilized effectively in the Malaysian ESL classroom is definitely timely (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010). Writing can be easily organized with the use of Internet and online teaching methods. With such convenience, students are likely to be more motivated, interested and less troubled (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010; Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Richardson, 2006; Pinkman, 2005; Ferdig, Thorne & Payne, 2004)

It is also important to realize that the use of ICT should not only be confined to CD Rom-based materials and Google and Yahoo searches. Although such skills are useful steps, students should not remain at search horizons. Teaching and learning methods should move from the initial computer as tutor approach (CALL) based on behaviorist model where repetitive drills are emphasized to computer mediated communication (CMC) (Tunku Mohtar & Mohd Saad, 2007). It is highlighted that lessons designed for students should involve them in critical processing of knowledge (Puthikanon, 2011; Pathak, 2007; Tunku Mohtar & Mohd Saad, 2007). One way communication will not offer opportunities for students to comment on another student.

Internet based materials should promote critical thinking and assist teachers in planning their teaching activities (Tunku Mohtar & Mohd Saad, 2007). It is also pertinent for students to use Internet materials as students will become more independent, involved in discovering new information and able to solve problems and learn at their own pace (Widodo & Nowawan, 2012; Ho, 1997). It is only when students are able to work independently we can claim that we have successfully integrated ICT in classroom teaching (Ho, 1997). This study is a step towards this direction. It is with this realization that this study puts forward the possibility of using the blogging principles in a popular writing platform in the Malaysian ESL teaching and learning activities.

Since the narrative writing platform as defined in this study is new in the educational context, particularly in Malaysian secondary schools, there is a need for a more in-depth study to explore the use of this platform. Investigating students' and teachers' experiences can be a source of useful information needed in the Malaysian context on how students are using the online platforms to support their learning. Such information is anticipated to demonstrate the possible application of online writing in teaching of writing skills. A case study based on interviews, reflections, written assignments and online social interaction patterns will hopefully make some contribution, to the growing pool of research in the area of online writing and pedagogical practices.

### 1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the use of the online narrative writing platform among six students and a teacher in a Chinese Secondary School in Penang. The overall aim of this study is translated into specific objectives which are expressed in the form of research questions.

## 1.6 Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

a) to investigate if the online narrative writing platform can enhance narrative writing skills.

b) to examine the patterns of interactions that take place in the online collaborative learning environment.

c) to investigate the students' and teacher's experiences and reflections of using the online narrative writing platform.

## 1.7 Research Questions

1) How does the use of the online narrative writing platform enhance the different aspects of narrative writing?

2) What are the patterns of interactions (student-student and teacher-student) in the online collaborative learning environment that enhance narrative writing?

3) What are the students' and teacher's experiences and reflections of using the online narrative writing platform?

## 1.8 Significance of the Study

The question of why it is important to conduct a research in the online writing environment is perhaps best summed up by Ellison and Wu (2008) who state that "more research is needed to determine how these new technologies can be incorporated into the classroom as pedagogically sound practices"(p.100). Therefore, this study provides evidence on how the online narrative writing platform can be

used in the teaching and learning of narrative writing. As such, this study contributes to the knowledge in the field of teaching writing in the Malaysian ESL classrooms.

This study may provide a ground for teachers to reflect on the use of ICT. Such knowledge is pertinent, in the light of teachers being skeptical and fearful of integrating online writing experiences using ICT based materials in their teaching (Ngah & Masood, 2006). Ngah and Masood (2006) found that ICT tools, have been used for "record keeping or glorified typewriter" (p. 234) by the teachers. The researcher hopes that this study provides the teachers with the knowledge of educational blogging in the social networking sites for teachers to experience a different approach in teaching narrative writing.

Psychologically, the current study is expected to increase the teachers' level of confidence in using educational technology incrementally when transitioning from older media to a newer media. It is hoped that teachers will be more receptive in the use of blogging via social networking sites in teaching of narrative writing. Since the current study investigates issues related to experience and collaboration among students and the teacher, it is also hoped that teachers will be able to consider integrating ICT tools when planning their lessons.

The findings of this study can also be used for training pre-service teachers. Pandian (2006) highlights that pre-service teachers in the teacher education institutes in Malaysia are not techno-savvy and do not benefit their roles as educators in future. Therefore, teacher education institutes will be an appropriate place to continue encouraging teachers to use ICT tools. By doing so, the future language teachers will probably be more confident and successful in their classroom teaching.

The findings of this study can be used by the professional development institutions and the State Education Department in conducting training sessions or in organizing special conventions that would address the issues related to the use of ICT in education. It is also hoped that the narrative writing platform will encourage self-directed learning among students to take responsibilities for their own learning. This has been highlighted by Pinkman (2005) who states that online writing tools as exemplified by blogs, can provide a conducive environment for language learners to exchange ideas, reflect, comment and revise and edit their work outside their classroom.

The writing platform created in this study can also be considered by textbook publishers. It is important for publishers to consider online teaching methods since the revised syllabus of the English text books in the secondary schools 2002 emphasizes ICT skills. According to Pillay (1998) Malaysian teachers basically depend on textbooks as a guide and a main resource in planning their teaching activities. Teachers' hectic daily work schedules do not give them the opportunity to produce their own teaching materials. Hence, by including the online narrative writing platform developed in this study in textbooks, teachers will be able to consider the writing platform when they are planning their teaching activities.

Finally, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge of online teaching methods. The findings of this study are expected to help the research enthusiasts in this area to continue their research in this particular area so that a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of online teaching and writing can be studied in the Malaysian ESL classrooms.

## 1.9 Theoretical Framework

The present study was designed based on two theories and a model. They are cognitive constructivism theory (Piaget, 1976), social constructivism theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). Piaget's Cognitive Constructivism theory and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism theory are used in this study because both these theories considered learning in relation to social interactions. Piaget views construction of knowledge based on learners' experiences and further enhanced by interacting with peers and experts whereas Vygotsky views learning as occurring when there is social interactions and internalization process by learners. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model is used as part of the theoretical framework in order to gain a deeper understanding of the interactions of cognitive, teacher and social presences. Figure 1.2 represents the theoretical framework underpinning the present study.

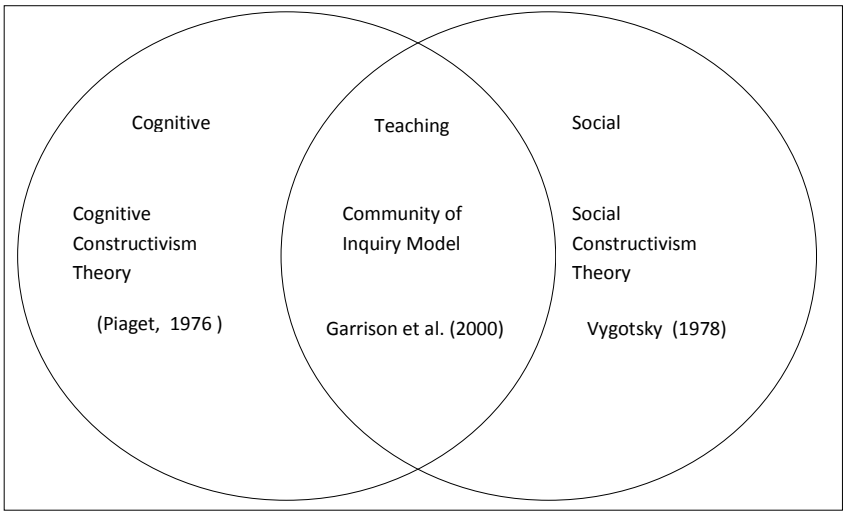


*Figure 1.2*. Theoretical Framework

## 1.10 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is arrived by incorporating the dual writing platforms within the online narrative writing platform namely the tutor platform and the learner platform. The interactions within and between these platforms are observed for patterns of interactions which in turn are related to the outcomes of writing performance, experiences and reflections. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.3. As this is a qualitative study the conceptual framework is used to serves as a starting point to explore aspects of writing skills interactions and experiences of the students and teacher while engaged in the online narrative writing platform. This conceptual framework is no way limit the scope of the qualitative research.

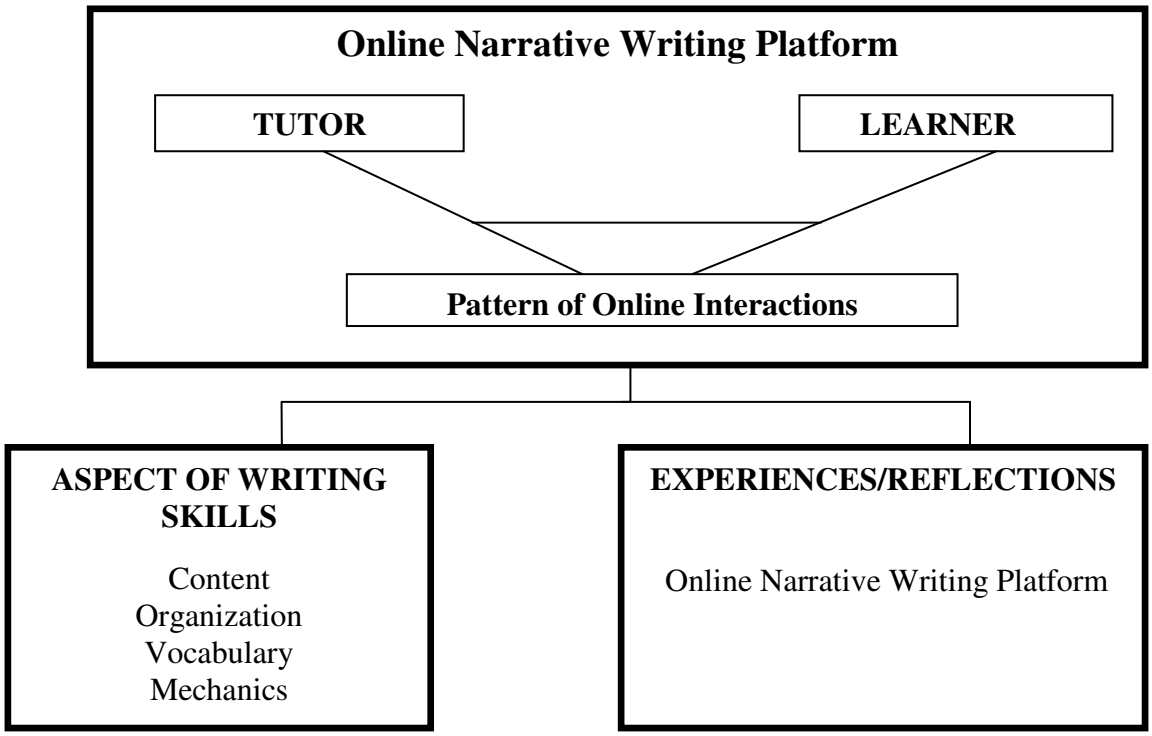


*Figure 1.3. Conceptual Framework*

## 1.11 Operational Definitions

Operational terms used in this study are defined in the following sections.

### 1.11.1 Tutor Platform

The tutor platform is a platform embedded within Facebook where the teacher provides the direction and guidance for narrative writing. Students are guided by the teacher to write the narrative essays. The teacher with the use of the tutor platform provides the title, tips, suggestions, explanation and model essays to help students write their narrative essays. The interactions between student-student and teacher-student can take place in tutor platform.

### 1.11.2 Learner Platform

The learner platform is embedded within Facebook and students are instructed to write their essays in this platform. The students in this study are encouraged to write their individual essays based on the titles given to them. Following this, they are engaged in the social interactions in the collaborative learning environment for six weeks. Students are encouraged to interact with their friends and teacher to improve their essays. Ideas from the teacher and peers during the interactions are considered when they need to write their final essays. After the interactions in the online collaborative learning environment the students write another essay (final essay) based on the ideas and comments given by the students and teacher.

### 1.11.3 Online Narrative Writing Platform

The online narrative writing platform refers to the online space within the Facebook environment. The tutor platform and the learner platform are jointly termed as the online narrative writing platform in this study.