BREAKING THE SILENCE: ICT AND THE ELDERLY IN MALAYSIA

Normaliza Abd Rahim, 1Zaitul Azma, 2Zainon Hamzah, 3Normahdiah Sheik Said, 4Norizan Che Su, 5Ibrahim Salleh
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia,
Serdang, 43400 Selangor
normaliza@fbmk.upm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

In the developed world today technology plays an important role in helping people to live longer and lead better lives. The elderly who shy away from technology can expose themselves to the risks of becoming isolated and under stimulated. Most of the elderly population do not have a high degree of computer literacy, and are not so familiar with using computers. Hence, to enhance the quality of their lives, it is pertinent that our present ICT is designed to meet the needs of this population.

With the emergence of ICT in Malaysia, the country is improving rapidly. Malaysia which was once mainly dependent on agriculture has moved its focus to manufacturing and information services. This has given employment opportunities to many Malaysians, and increased not only the diversity of the work force, but also the quality of their life. This does not mean, however, that the country has ignored the agriculture sector. Rather, with ICT, we are able to grow better crops and produce greater yields. As weather changes are monitored, damages due to rains and floods are minimized. Although ICT has also brought some new problems, overall, it has increased the quality of Malaysian's lives. Here, the elderly will not be neglected and hence we do hope that ICT would continue to bring greater benefits to the Malaysians, in the future.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Most of the world's illiterate people live in nations in which scores or even hundreds of languages are spoken. The developing countries contain most of the world's 6,170 living languages. According to Grimes (1988) more than 60 percent (3,764) of these languages are spoken in Africa and Asia, and another 20 percent (1,216) are spoken in the islands of the Pacific. Grimes (Ibid) adds that although individual language communities can be relatively small, they may, when put together, make up a large portion of the population of a given country. In Guatemala, 44 percent of the population is made up of local language communities. In Papua New Guinea, the ratio is about 98 percent and in a number of African countries, close to 100 percent (Ibid).

Language can be a major barrier to literacy and in everyday situation. It can also be a barrier for elderly to learn by using the ICT. When a person speaks an unwritten language and is expected to learn to read in a language he does not understand, becoming literate can be a confusing and at the same time a frustrating process. Many give up permanently, convinced that reading and writing are beyond their grasp.

Gerardo Wipio Deicat (1981: 67-82), drawing on his experience as a Peruvian educator and Aguaruna Indian, states that "those who teach in a language other than that of the child in the lower grades are violating principles of good pedagogy and are guilty of cultural imposition. More often than not, this type of education has been the cause of native children dropping out of school and experiencing psychological trauma, resulting in their failure to learn to read and write."

The concept of being an elderly according to Ramon Valle as the "golden years" isn't necessarily true. Being an elderly is seen as an inevitable outcome of life but not necessarily anything positive. The population suffers from a higher level of morbidity so it's a lot harder to enjoy, or look forward to enjoying, those years. Even though the traditional value system supports the role of an old person, the reality is that elders have less of a role, or no role, in a complex society such as ours. Like other older adults immigrating from traditional societies,
they don't understand why their kids don't come to them more for advice (Hendricks, J., & Hendricks, C. D, 1986).

The greatest service needs of elderly are the problem of lack of attention within the communities themselves to the phenomenon of aging (Manuel, R., & Reid, J. (1982). Communities are not ready for the vast numbers of elderly that will be present in the environment in the upcoming century. It would seem that a great deal of public health education, very similar to what has taken place in the other community about life after age 60 or 65, but pitched to the elderly. Manuel, R., & Reid, J. (1982) would also strongly target the age 40-60 group to prepare for lifestyle changes, diet changes, and things that need to be done to handle the later years (Ibid) especially in trying not to neglect the elderly in the community. Therefore, with the help of ICT, the elderly will be able to communicate with the world (Ibid). With the help from the government the language barrier will be looked into and expose the usage of ICT in everyday situation.

A strategy to design ICT for the elderly based on experiences from a project called MAMA (Mobile Augmented Memory Aid) was undertaken in Sweden (Waterworth and Waterworth, 2005). This project focused mainly on people with memory or communication disorder. The main goal was to examine how ICT can be used to support and improve memory and communication capacity, as well as aid sensory stimulation for people with memory difficulties caused by dementia. Waterworth and Waterworth (2005) claim that by strengthening the contact with their environment and improving their relations with nursing staff and relatives they hoped to improve the conditions for better care and quality of life for this group of people. Within the project they developed prototypes in the form of four software applications and one interaction/navigation tool.

In Denmark the use of ICT has been on the political agenda for almost a decade, and one of the main concerns has been how to avoid the development of a digital divide in society (Foley, 2005). According to Foley (2005), one of the groups that has been in focus is the elderly. They have been fairly slow in the appropriation of the new technologies. The elderly have not been accustomed with ICT either through education or through their jobs as compared to the younger groups in society (Waterworth and Waterworth, 2005) and Foley (2005). It has been claimed that the elderly neither had the same interests in ICT nor the same abilities to use ICT as the other groups in society. The objective of the different Danish governments has been to facilitate the use of ICTs in all groups within the Danish society. And in the case of the elderly it has been seen as imperative because in the future it will be a problem if the elderly is not able to do shopping and contact authorities through the use of ICT. This is related to the demographic development in society, where the older generations will increase dramatically in numbers while the younger generations will dwindle. What this means is that there will not be people around to deliver the same kinds of services as the elderly are receiving today. If this happens, they may not be able to serve themselves better, for instance in enjoying the one stop government services. This is the reason why the Danish government established a special research and development program concerning the use of ICT among the elderly in 1998 (Foley, 2005) where 11 different projects received funding and the idea was that they should create possibilities for the elderly that would enable them to stay longer in the active workforce; increase the knowledge of ICT in the elderly group; create benefits for the disabled elderly; encourage home shopping and create elderly networks. Furthermore, the program should gain new knowledge about the way elderly learn to use ICT. The program committee who selected the 11 projects chose to finance four research projects, of which this project is one of them, six local ICT-development projects and one project which dealt with the dissemination of information about the issues related to the field in focus (Foley et.al., 2003).

One of the projects that involved the elderly is the ‘ICT-network for elderly Councils’ (Foley, 2005) where twelve elderly Councils from remote areas in Denmark are working together to gain increased political influence by utilising ICT and Internet and also the senior application of multi media techniques as a factor in the development of flexible jobs. This is to develop the incremental change of generations in a private company through the use of ICT, which enable the elderly employees to gradually withdraw from their jobs and the company to retain their expertise for as long as possible (Foley et.al., 2002). Next is the active ICT senior project where the purpose of this project is to make as many elderly as possible interested in using
ICT as a natural tool in their every day lives. Teaching a large number of elderly the basic skills required to operate a computer is carried out within the realm of a self-reliant elderly centre – with users of the centre as teachers, which is considered a safe environment for the elderly.

A Malaysian writer, Amri Rahayat (2006) claims that to ensure that rural communities especially the elderly, truly embrace ICT, they must be turned into active participants who understand the underlying technology rather than just being passive users. This will create a "moment of truth" in which the elderly realises on its own will - through exploration and regular use of technology - the benefits and potential applications of ICT to suit their own unique needs. In turn, it will help ensure that the technology application will evolve.

It is hoped that based on the background of the study, this research is able to introduce the importance of ICT and at the same time inculcate consciousness raising of ICT among the elderly. Hence, we are going to investigate the motivation level when using ICT in everyday situation for the elderly.

OBJECTIVES
This paper focuses on the below objectives:
1. To find out the pattern of using ICT amongst the elderly in Malaysia
2. To investigate the types of ICT usage amongst the elderly in Malaysia

METHODOLOGY
The samples consist of 60 samples from Selangor and Perak. The samples were the elderly ages 60 and above. The elderly were interviewed according to questions in the questionnaire. Several types of ICT, e.g. mobile phones, digital camera, MP4, lap-top, Bluetooth were shown to the elderly in order for them to recognize, utilize and understand the usage of the technology. The use of internet too was shown by using the laptop and copies of several Web pages were given to the elderly.

FINDINGS
Mobiles Phones
It is found that most of the subjects used ICT in their everyday lives. 80% of the subjects prefer to use ICT for communication purposes. 10% of the subjects felt that it is not important for them to use the ICT in their everyday lives. The reasons were because they could not afford to buy a phone and also credit to top up so therefore they did not feel that it is a need to have a mobile phone. 10% of the subjects were not bothered and ignorant about the use of ICT. The results were a bit surprising as all the 80% of the subjects have mobile phones though 50% of them did not use the text messages to communicate. They would prefer to talk rather than text message. This was due to small font and therefore difficult for them to read.

E-mail (Computer)
It is found that 30% of the subjects prefer to use the computer as a means of communication. The subjects used the e-mail to communicate with their children abroad and to communicate with their business associates in Malaysia and abroad. The subjects felt that by using the e-mail, more information could be mentioned and read and questions to be asked. 30% of the subjects prefer to use the Instant Messenger for the purpose of communication. They felt that it is faster and decision could be made instantly. The favorites instant messenger were Yahoo and MSN messenger. 20% of the subjects would use the Yahoo messenger to speak on the phone. It is cheap and easy to use. According to the subjects, most of their friends have the speakers for the computer and it is easy for negotiation in business and besides, they would be able to communicate at any convenient time.

Online Newspaper (Internet)
90% of the subjects used the online newspaper for reading. The font size in the computer can be enlarged in order for them to read appropriately. They said that the normal newspapers were too small and it was really disturbing when they had to find their glasses in order to read. The best way was to use the online newspaper. 10% of the subjects did not use the online newspaper because they did not have the facilities and not enough money to buy a computer. They could not afford to pay RM3.00 for the charge at cyber cafes just to read the online
newspaper. Therefore, they would buy the normal newspaper and jokingly they said that they would be able to use the newspaper to wrap things in the house. Logically, they also need the newspaper to wrap most of the crockery in the cupboard.

**Digital Camera**

20% of the subjects used the digital camera in their everyday lives. They used the camera to take photos of their grandchildren. Photographs were seen all over in their houses. The usage of the digital cameras was full utilized like scanning, downloading, etc. 80% of the subjects did not use the digital camera because they did not feel the needs of having it.

**CONCLUSION**

To conclude, the pattern of ICT usage amongst the elderly was clearly shown. The elderly use the ICT in their everyday lives. The types of ICT that they used were listed and noted in order for us to look into more detail about their needs in using the ICT for communication. It is therefore that ICT is important for elderly in Malaysia for communication.

**REFERENCES**


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