BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have made it possible to use the tools for assisting the process of learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom. In addition to that, ICT tools have prepared learners for participation in a networked, information society where knowledge is the most critical resource for personal and social development.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Schools are now examination oriented, thus making teachers wanting to complete their syllabus fast. Due to this, students have no room to ‘academically interact’ which is found to be a valuable experience and resourceful (Bull, Kimbal, & Stansberry 1998; Vrasidas & McIsaac 1999). Their teachers do not have time to help the students to interact naturally apart from having to rush for time to finish their syllabi. Thus, the language learning in “isolation” (learning solely the English Language to merely fulfill the syllabus) among students to achieve the learning process objective of interacting is disallowing the students to communicate and interact naturally using the English Language. Therefore, students have little confidence in the use of the English Language in speaking and writing.

Also, there is a need for more proficient peers to guide them (native speakers or persons who have higher proficiency level than the learner) for learning to take place. Learning is a social practice. It looks like interaction by writing with one another is not a practice in schools as teachers are more into chasing time to prepare students for their examinations. Therefore, the
students do not perform well in their writing skills and do not score in their examinations. They need proper guidance in writing content as their essays have no quality in content.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of this study is to investigate three major issues of CSCL in developing ESL writing. It attempts to find out the Malaysian students’ perceptions about computer supported collaborative writing. Secondly, it is to investigate the collaborative strategies that are used by the students while the students are writing their projects. In the light of the above aims, another aim is to find out to what extent did the CSCL (through the e-pal projects) contribute in the development of the writing skills of the selected Malaysian students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were formulated to address the objectives of this study.

i) What are the perceptions of the selected Malaysian students regarding collaborative supported learning via online communication?

ii) What are the collaborative strategies used by these students when writing their e-pal projects?

iii) To what extent did the CSCL (through the e-pal projects) contribute in the development of the writing skills of the selected Malaysian students?

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study was aimed at improving students’ writing skills in English via CSCL. The researcher provided each Malaysian student with the email addresses of their US buddies. There were ten students from each country. Each Malaysian student attended to different topics through their interactions so that they would not copy each other during the period of the students embarking on the project. Furthermore, the study was confined to getting the responses of the student-respondents in regards to CSCL. Only the opinions of the students from Malaysia who are participating in this study were sought to analyze the perception of the students regarding this new way of learning. The study involved ten students of different levels i.e. Forms Two till Forms Fives, all of whom study in the same secondary school. These students were picked because they were reliable and the small number of students was
easily monitored. The students were reliable based on the researcher’s understanding of their background as well as their reputation in school.

EXPLANATION OF TERMS
The following definitions are necessary for this study:

**Collaborative learning**
The term “collaborative learning” refers to an instructional method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal (Dillenbourg 1999). “Collaborate” is generally described with phrases like “working together on a task, especially in a joint intellectual effort”. “Collaborative or group learning refers to instructional methods whereby students are encouraged or required to work together on tasks.”

**E-Pal projects**
This online project is called collaborative learning whereby a student communicated with another from a different country. The main idea of e-Pal projects was to simply exchange information and ideas concerning a particular event and to develop writing skills through written correspondence depending on the topic given.

**ESL Writing**
Writing skills are abilities that help writers to put their thoughts into meaningful form of words onto a piece of paper. Teachers are required to teach students to develop this skill in the ESL classroom so that they achieve their objective of creating students that are creative, fluent, independent and comprehensive in the act of writing.

**Secondary School Students**
In Malaysia, a secondary school consists two levels of students namely the lower secondary and the upper secondary. The lower secondary are the Forms one to the Form three, whereas the upper secondary are the Forms four and the Forms five.

**Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL)**
Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) is the latest and the most promising innovations to improve teaching and learning with the assistance and the guide of modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Collaborative or group learning refers to instructional methods whereby students are encouraged by their teachers or required to work together on learning tasks. These learning tasks lead the students to improve a certain skill merely to achieve the objectives of teaching and learning process.
PARTICIPANTS

Ten students from a secondary school in Seremban took part in this study. They were given the details on the purpose of the research and data collection methods. These students were randomly selected because it enabled the researcher to easily monitor them in the computer lab where the communication and exchanging of e-mails would take place and they were easily available for meetings with the researcher. Apart from that, the researcher told them what was expected from this project and they agreed. They were considered hardworking students generally by their teachers. Thus, the researcher felt that they were reliable to embark on the e-pal project.

As for the students from Mesa, Arizona in USA, the teacher from the USA (Valerie Foster) reported that her students are of high level of proficiency (very good) in the English language. All of them were of 17 years of age and were in their 12th grade-honors class. Thus, these details confirm that the students from USA are the ‘capable other’ to help students out from Malaysia in this research. Just like the subjects from Malaysia, there were also 7 males and 3 females in the class which the teacher from the USA provided. Interestingly, the students selected from her class include an Asian, a black American (African American), a Pakistani and the others are Anglo-Hispanic.

INSTRUMENTS

The qualitative interpretive methodology used in this research attempted to confront the reliability and validity demands. Triangulation was used to confront the validity problem and get a fully, rich and complex understanding of the process to be viewed from different perspectives, namely those of the students and the independent graders (the grades they awarded for the project). In order to get a more detailed picture of the situation and highlight contradictions, different sources as well as different tools were used. The table below will show the tools used to answer the research questions.

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collaborative learning via online communication?

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**DATA ANALYSIS**

In data analysis, interviews, email entries of the students that were printed out, project essays grades that were awarded by the independent graders, the project essays that consist of feedbacks from the e-pal buddies from USA, the teachers’ reports of the student performance in the classroom and the students’ graded classroom essays which were done without guidance from the e-pals were examined to address all research questions.

The data gathered from the interviews from the students were recorded in an audio-tape recorder and transcribed. The transcripts were later coded and categorized, according to the themes such as feelings, weaknesses and strengths, experiences gained, strategies used, improvement as well as retaining of information, as criteria for data analysis apart from answering major areas of research questions. The researcher, considered the themes to be better descriptors of the interview segment, came out with these codes of themes to answer the research questions based on observations on works of Hoter (2002), and Goh (2002). The areas of the themes are listed below:

A – learning
B – how it helped
C – language learning
D - perceptions
E – strengths
F – weaknesses
G – feelings
H – retention of information
DATA VALIDITY

Due to the nature of this study that focused on the students’ perception regarding a new approach of learning (collaboration with their buddies in the USA), questions were asked about their perception. This is the construct validity issue that was considered.

The validity of the data collected in this study was checked using three methods, namely looking at the email entries of the students when they were interacting with their buddies and the reports from the English teacher, responses from the interview and the project essays. The students produced the project which consisted of the essays; they also printed and kept the email entries they received from their buddies as requested by the researcher for analyses purposes. These (e-mail entries and project essay) were qualitatively compared to answer Research Question 2. At the same time, the interview responses were taken into account so as to validate the results attained from the email entries and the project essay and that the data would complement each other. Besides that, this triangulation could help the researcher to double-check the findings obtained (Huberman and Miles 1994) that helped add detailed descriptions in the research.

As for the external validity, the findings of this research can be useful to others who are in the teaching practice in similar settings. In the case of this research, such other similar settings refer to the level of students. To establish such external validity, research had attempted to provide details of students’ level in writing performance in the classroom so that there can be an understanding of similar issues of teaching practices and determine how readers can make good comparisons of similar issues within their teaching practices and determine how the examples can be a guide to them to improve their current practices or policy to their settings.

DATA RELIABILITY

The reliability of the data was ensured mainly for the grades given to the project by the independent grader and the English Language Writing Skills report by two experienced teachers. The teacher who has been teaching for more than twenty years was asked to independently rate the students’ performances in the aspect of writing. The teacher graded
the students’ project essays using the SPM and the PMR marking scheme for the students accordingly even though the writing form is the same in the aspect of continuous writing and assignment.

Meanwhile, the other two teachers who reported on the students’ overall performance (in the aspect of their writing skills) have been teaching for seventeen years and twenty nine years. This shows that the data is reliable, based on the experiences of the three teachers in the teaching line. Apart from their experiences in teaching English Language, all three teachers also have marked the PMR and the SPM examination papers thus making them experts in the field. The data is further validated by means of a triangulation.

This study discussed students’ individual perceptions and opinions about e-pal projects. Therefore, other researchers using the same subjects, the same validated interview instruments and the same procedure would probably arrive at the same conclusions. The students’ perceptions will not be influenced by the individual researchers and would remain constant.

Using the ESL Composition Profile by Jacobs et.al 1981 to grade the essays students produce in the classroom will also rectify the reliability of the data collected in this study. Rectification is by comparing the grades attained by the students in the classroom and the grades attained in the essays after they collaborated with their buddies in the USA. The ESL Composition Profile is used as a marking scheme for the essays that are produced in the classroom as teachers are trained using the scheme in the classroom although the final essays are graded using the SPM and the PMR marking scheme. Besides, teachers grading the essays produced in the classroom are given the liberty to choose the marking scheme and thus ESL Composition Profile is used although the two schemes have the same features and are holistic. This marking scheme is used to see in detail the weaknesses/strength of the students in the aspects of grammar that covers Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language and Mechanics.
FINDINGS - RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Many different perceptions from the students were found from the interview. These include their perception towards the project, their feelings, as well as their perceptions towards the weaknesses and the strengths of the project and future use of online communication. Their positive feelings about the project were stated by codes E and their various perceptions about the project were as given in codes C, D, F and Code G that portrayed the students’ learning tools for the future. All the students perceived this project as a positive mean to learn as well. The strengths of how they perceived the project as were given in C1- C7 and the weaknesses reported were listed in D1-D2, which were fewer as compared to the strengths indicated. All these students also stated that they preferred learning and doing assignments by getting information from their buddies in another classroom from overseas using online communication unlike a study by Dimmick et. Al. (2000) that showed people using the internet for the purpose of convenience, passing time and entertainment. We can conclude that the students perceive this project as positive and negative in that the e-pal project has both positive and negative elements although mostly positive. However, students were appreciative of the interaction as a way of engaging actively to learn and get content for their essays.

FINDINGS - RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Based on the data analysis carried out on the students’ interview, the e-mail entries and the students’ projects, it could be determined that all the students, regardless of their age and gender used the social construction of knowledge to complete their essays. In particular, the strategy that they used was that they retained all the information sent by their buddies in their essay. This also meant that they did not refer elsewhere for information to be written in their essay. Apart from that, the emerging patterns were to facilitate learning from buddies’ expertise. This could probably be due to the fact that the students believed that their buddies were the experts in the topics given to them, as well as because of the reasons the topics involved the lifestyles of the people in the USA. Besides answering the research question 3, it could also be seen here that all the students attempted similarly although they think differently in that they used all information posted by their buddies to complete their project.
To sum up, Stacey’s (1999) framework that contributed to this research were namely the students asking their buddies for clarification. The students asked for clarification when they were unsure of ideas that were posted by their buddies. Thus, their buddies sent pictures to accommodate the information. They were also sharing of the students’ ideas with their buddies apart from the topic that they were discussing on via e-mail. Besides that, the pattern that emerged was when the students asked and called for editing to make sure of the quality of their essays before handing up the project. The aspects that were edited were the grammar and mechanics of the essay. There were also corrections of content. These attributes were considered the students’ collaboration strategies that were used as approaches to attend to their e-pal project that enhanced their writing skills. To conclude, the students agreed that this new way of learning are factors enhancing learning of skills, namely the writing skills, could be ironed out in the education system. This could be a platform for teachers to at least try to overcome skill based practices towards technology in teaching and learning.

**FINDINGS - RESEARCH QUESTION 3**

The collaborative online e-pal project has contributed to all the students in the aspect of grammar, essay organization and content. Based on the findings, all ten students have shown improvement in their essay that they produced. From the data taken from the students’ grades in the projects and the interview, some information was identified to prove that the e-pal project had helped the students to improve the content of their essays, particularly after the students’ buddies helped them. The results from the grades of the projects and the interviews suggested that the input on grammar sent by the e-pal buddies to the students had improved the language command of the students in the English language tremendously, and these are especially used for the content of the essay.

The level of students’ potential development (as in the improvement in grades) was determined through problem solving under adult guidance (of both the teachers in the USA and Malaysia) and through collaboration with the field experts (the students’ e-pal buddies). The collaborative process had provided the students with a network of help from their buddies. In addition, this was further confirmed by all the students who had talked about improvement who practiced the new language of knowledge that served as content for their essays. The graded classroom essays showed the students’ level of performances analytically in the writing skills. The ESL Composition Profile marking scheme was also used so that
apart from the holistic report from the teachers, those grades also can substantiate the students’ writing performances. These two grades (from SPM and PMR marking scheme and the ESL Composition Profile) that were awarded by the independent grader were compared with the project grades.

Benefits of collaboration have been proven in the work of Apple Research Labs (1993) whereby students’ attitude towards self and learning improved apart from test scores and their performances. As for this study, the aspects of writing skills that had improvement were the grammar, organization and content. The students were confident with their essays when their buddies edited it for them. The grades of their essays indeed showed that they have improved in their writing skills. Therefore, it can be concluded that the collaborative process of the e-pal project in this study has helped improve the students’ essays to the extent of enhancing their learning especially in the aspects of grammar, essay organization and content in the field of writing. Having looked at this research question on the extent of improvement the students gained when embarking on the online project which is new to them, this study moved on to address the second research question which touched on the students’ perception of this new way of learning.

The Malaysian students had positive feelings and perceptions about getting involved in learning via e-pal projects. This was to answer research question 1. Learning writing skills especially grammar via e-pal project was new to the students. Therefore, the students were enthusiastic about the project methodology i.e receiving and sending e-mails to their buddies in the USA. Most importantly, the students were happy and excited to share new knowledge among themselves about USA and Malaysia with their ten new friends. Similar to the view of O’Malley (1999), online technologies are perceived by students as having benefits. He added that the approach that ‘move away from the basic face-to-face relationship between a teacher and student would impact their perception of learning’.

Students in this study found and perceived that there were more strengths compared to weaknesses when they embarked on the e-pal projects. This also contributed to answer research question 1. Shortage of time and lack of replies from the students’ buddies were the only factors that de-motivated the students in the e-pal project. Other than that, the students were generally happy about taking part in the e-pal project. They gained knowledge about life abroad and cultural awareness was attained.
All the information posted by the buddies was used as content in their essays as the students felt that the buddies were the experts (capable other) in the field of lifestyles and culture of USA when they made comparisons in their essays. This was also to answer research question 1. The Malaysian students used all information that was posted by their buddies as content for their essays. Even the pictures that were e-mailed were used as illustration.

Strategies used when employing the e-pal online project include learning collaboratively which was found to help develop knowledge through communication. In addition, they received feedback, and discussed ideas, which in turn established social constructed learning, motivation, learning, skills and knowledge at/from a distance. This was to answer the research question 2. Stacey’s (1999) framework was used and it was found that the students called on their buddies for editing, shared information and ideas and also asked for clarification on issues that they did not understand. In a study by Rajala (2002), it was found that when students interacted in a collaborative manner, they were able to look for information on specific themes.

The samples of this study performed far better through online experience compared to the classroom experience. There was no vast difference in the aspects of students’ levels of performance in writing when it came to writing using information posted by their buddies, although there were two level of forms (Upper and secondary forms). This was also to answer research question 2. The ESL Composition Profile was used to look at how the students performed in the classroom. The researcher found that the students produced essays of quality after the online collaboration by their buddies in the USA as their content in the USA obtained better grades in addition to that of grammar, structure, mechanics and organization. The final essays were graded using the SPM and the PMR marking schemes by another independent grader.

Collaborative strategies, as mentioned earlier, were used by the samples mainly because samples perceived this as a trusted manner in attaining information from their ‘capable other’ buddies. This was to answer research question 1 as well as 2. There has been an improvement in the grades for writing in the English subject when the students wrote using information from the responses given by their ‘capable other’ buddies. The authentic feedbacks that they attained from their buddies were used as content for their essays and thus
made their essays gain better grades. The information from their buddies showed the usefulness of interaction and online collaboration to complete the project apart from peer review. Being looked up as buddies (the capable other) who know better about their countries’ lifestyles and culture, the students were more motivated to be confident that their essays were clear and error-free before they handed them up. This was to answer the research question 3. The students used all the information posted by their capable buddies for the content of their essays.

Students have gained new avenue of knowledge of cultures in the USA and learnt the skills of writing, thus enhancing their learning. When their essays were edited, their buddies made them pay closer attention to writing structure like grammar, punctuation, mechanism, organization, spelling and clarity. Their active engagement role in online collaboration has indicated the student role in learning that made significant improvements in the writing skills. This was also to answer research question 3.

With regards to the use of distant collaboration, Stewart-Dore (1996), found that students exchanging ideas via e-mail, write more and have more ideas. Apart from discussing issues for their essays, they also discussed other issues such as what their essays required them to do. In this study, after having completed the project, the e-pal project aroused some of the students’ interest to discuss other topics.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study has positive implications and it can benefit several parties namely students, parents, teachers and educators, the Ministry of Education. As this research has made an impact on the students who participated in this research, it is hoped that others may also gain from this research, if they use it as a means to impart valuable knowledge. The parties mentioned are as follows:

**Students**

First, taking part in the e-pal project is intrinsically motivating for students, since they see it as a trendy and useful tool which allows them to get connected with students from the other parts of the world daily. As English is the main language used in the Internet, learners begin to appreciate the usefulness in learning the language, and thus being useful in the classroom. Since it is a new way of learning writing as mentioned by the students involved in this
research (in their perception – Research Question 2) when they were interviewed, this research would imply that the students would be eager to learn through new avenues.

Consequently, they will use their own time and pace to learn things independently. When they collaborate with their buddies from abroad, they use the tools of the internet in a real life situation. Indirectly, they are learning language skills, namely the writing skills and this kind of academic writing can contribute to the enhancement of grammar, mechanics, structure as well as organization of a writing piece. When their buddies edited their essay, errors were identified and corrections were made before the students handed up their work. This is one of the advantages of the e-pal project where the students handed up their completed project in satisfaction apart from other implications such as editing, proof reading, getting clarification and information for the content of their essays.

Surfing the internet also gives students control over their learning and this is usually done at their own time and pace, i.e. according to their individual needs. This may motivate them and promote learner independence and the development of learning strategies, provided that the learners receive appropriate guidance from their facilitator. This approach can further enhance the students’ performance in their writing skills by focusing on academic writing as well as experiential learning apart from working on ‘real world problems’ (Weir 1992), or to that matter academic problems/tasks without imposing any pressure on them to learn. Apart from retrieving information from their friends/buddies, learners can also create their own materials (such as projects) and share them with partner classes, classmates or with the general public. These readers are audiences of the students’ piece of writing which can be considered authentic.

This possibility also adds a great deal of interest, as learners communicate with a real audience, who will get the first-hand information about a particular topic. As the language used on the Internet is lexically and syntactically more complex than the oral discourse, students may gain a broader range of knowledge, and vocabulary in the English language. Communication with the audience who are native speakers indirectly forces students to practice specific skills such as negotiating, persuading, asking questions, solving problems, clarifying meaning, and informal communication, as shown in this study. Transcripts of their
discourses (e-mail entries) which the students printed have been attached in their project which they handed in after having completed their e-pal project. Exchanges of messages mean more chances for skills development i.e. students gaining knowledge of their essay topics, writing skills developed and enhanced after students called on their buddies for editing and clarification.

**Parents**

Since this project is working together for a purpose (Wiersema, 2000), parents should be pulled in to play an important role in this interaction that involves world-wide experience. They can possibly interact with the teachers with regards with the children’s’ progress, have a dialog with the school staff as well as other parents and experience multilingual communications. This focuses on parents playing an important role on their children’s learning as well as their achievement. Mutual respect and understanding is thus achieved in the process. The e-pal project can be a tool for the parents to understand and explore the environment and community of education and they can also have confidence of their children’s computer activities without worrying about the boundaries of internet.

As for parents of students, this research has implied that they can have dialogues with school staff, experience multilingual communication, have confidence that students’ tasks are monitored and also understand the online environment. Besides that, parents can at their own time and pace communicate and exchange ideas with the teachers concerned about their children’s progress in school and any tasks/assignments given. Now, with all these, writing classrooms need not have boundaries to teach and learn as everything (information/knowledge) is available at the click of the mouse.

When it comes to assignments or tasks given to their children in school, to a certain extent, parents will not know the content/topic which students are required to present in writing. From this research, it can be implied that parents have to allow their children to be exposed to their ‘capable other’ in gaining the content for their writing task instead of going to the library. After all, the information is authentic and this is all (as in research question 3) used by their children. Parents need not fear of any falsehood in the content of their children’s writing because the teachers would have obtained the parents’ permissions to carry out this project. This seems to be somewhat like a ‘technology tuition,’ whereby the buddies feed information for these children to write on the topics given to them for their assignments.
Teachers and Educators

Communication and delivery strategies can help language teachers and educators to begin exploring ways and moving ahead in developing interesting pedagogy and teaching methodology since there has been an improvement in writing, to some extent. This understanding of the current research implies that there is a change in the way the internet and communication should be taught in schools. The teachers should feel comfortable with the tools of the internet and be given the opportunity to use the internet in a real teaching situation. Tasks should be developed within the various courses to help the teachers advance to the next stage in adopting the internet as a teaching tool.

This way also, a teacher can involve students in their decisions. Due to the complexities and difficulties mentioned by the students in the weaknesses of the e-pal project, the teacher must be aware of the impacts which may be incurred by these activities. Students must be told that there will occur problems like the ones the students incurred in this research i.e. e-pal buddies taking too much time to reply their e-mails, lack of responses from e-pal buddies that can be used as content. The occurrence of problems does not mean a passive role for the teacher, who should co-ordinate activities, focus students’ attention on the linguistic aspects of texts and assist them in developing their learning strategies, as well as provide the necessary support by not stopping them to use the Internet merely because of the stated problems.

Technology integration is vital in the process of teaching and learning of the English language i.e. writing skills. They must also be aware that a lot of time is required in this kind of task that deals with online tools in meaningful assignments/online projects. It must be clear to the teacher why this tool can be more successful than the traditional ones. As in this research, it has been more successful than the traditional methodology and therefore teachers can use this new way of learning with confidence. The reasons for using the Internet range from increased motivation to learning computer skills; nevertheless, students should not be asked to do certain tasks on the computer which can also be done using a book.

The main objective of teachers is first get students involved in knowledge rather than improve their mind (Scardamalia, et al.1994). This is in line of teaching and learning process where a teacher can become initiative and creative in getting a classroom from overseas to facilitate his/her teaching. After knowledge is accumulated and modified, then the students’ minds are improved and thus they experience sustained improvement of ideas and
understanding (Scardamalia 2002). CSCL supports this process for teachers as well as educators because learning is active, initiative, constructive and contextualized.

**Ministry of Education (MOE)**

The outcome of this research has unraveled many ideas which can be put into practice by those in the Ministry of Education (MOE). For example, since the students and parents can benefit from the outcome of the research, the MOE should implement the learning of language via e-pal projects in which the Ministry of Education can elaborate with the classrooms in the USA and provide teachers with the classrooms according to the different proficiency levels of the students and difficulty of the subjects.

In addition, the MOE can implement the learning of the language by introducing the integration of the e-pal projects to all language teachers by means of literature, syllabus and even conducting courses for teachers so that they can be exposed to teaching, using this new technology. According to a webpage [Web page of the International Bureau of Education of UNESCO](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/links.htm), the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) continues with the objectives of the previous plans and also gives high priority to reorienting the education and training system so that teachers can acquire the knowledge, skills and expertise necessary to support a knowledge-based economy. In line with this goal, a number of measures have been identified. One of it is the encouraging of the development of creative and critical thinking skills and independent learning in and among students. As this study promotes technology, specifically writing via e-pal projects, it is important to note that peer review from abroad must be encouraged. Thus, MOE should stress that there is a need for Malaysia to have an education system collaborating with abroad.

Apart from that, this research also identifies promoting and implementing programmes for lifelong learning through the provision of training courses and education programmes through the Internet or other ICT-related media, and through the establishment of distance education thus showing the importance of computer communication and interaction literacy, it hopes to promote computer literacy at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. As this study has noted that the students have deepened their learning experience from the e-pal projects, the MOE would gained if it implements learning writing skills via e-pal projects into its curriculum.
Courses (long and short-term)
In the teaching of technology, this research could imply that courses that are long and short-term can benefit language teachers. The Ministry of Education could offer long-term courses in which language teachers can major in the courses of technology covering the usage of the internet, learning of the internet language, and the impacts of e-pal projects to students so that they can be encouraged to get classrooms from elsewhere to communicate with their students. At the same time, language is incorporated during the usage of computers and also during the teaching and learning process.

This research also implies that short courses are needed in the field of technology and language. The implications of this research on short-term courses are that the Ministry of Education could expose language teachers to such a program involving e-pal buddies. The Ministry could either provide websites that teachers could log on to or teachers themselves can find their own classrooms as what had been done by the researcher in this research. Teaching the English language in a computer lab by using technology can indeed be enthusiastic. Virtual classrooms and e-conferencing can be introduced as this varied methodology of learning would be of interest to students. This would also promote collaboration. Students acquire knowledge and this helps the students to understand better what they learned before. This learning is delivered at the students pace, not instructed live by a teacher and the teacher is the facilitator. The same goes for learning via skype, twitter, facebook and MSN. Students will acquire content of a topic via real life instruction.

SUGGESTION OF WRITING USING TECHNOLOGY

Having discussed the above, there is a suggestion to regard the teaching of writing critically in a computer laboratory. This is because writing skills can be taught by using technology collaboratively i.e. via e-pal projects. Although the processes of CSCL in teaching and learning might take a long time, but learning happens and writing skills are improved. The suggestion attempts to propose how teachers could introduce in their classroom the practices of teaching writing skills by using the e-pal project method without ignoring the social element of writing. A creative teacher could get the students to log on to a website after introducing to them the concept of e-pal so that the students could communicate with their e-pal buddies on an issue or task. Websites that might help both teachers and students are:-

http://eslclassifieds.com/towerpals.html
E-pal projects should be started in classrooms but could be carried out in the language classroom or computer lab or even out of classroom. A simple lesson plan (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007: pp 67-68) that can be adopted and might be of help to teachers.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

There were several limitations in this study. This study might not be a true representation of the whole population of the students in the country as it was only confined to only one state in Malaysia in a secondary school, i.e. Seremban. Other limitations of this study are listed below:

The samples used in this study were all in a secondary school which are the lower secondary (Forms One to Three) and the upper secondary (Forms Four to Five). There were only ten participants who participated in this study. They were residing in Seremban. This study was confined to only one type of school (grade B secondary school which is a sub urban school).

The present research investigation was also limited to secondary school. A study of exploring the usage of internet among primary school students is recommended as this may yield interesting and variant other findings to the fact that primary schools students may have different attitudes towards learning as opposed to the secondary schools students.

The scope of research covered by this investigation was limited to exploring the practices in teaching writing within the writing lesson in an English classroom. An English Language teacher covers four skills in a classroom namely the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

The data collected in this study certainly shows an understanding of the special needs of each group of students which are peer tutoring and dictating ideas to peers as these are new methods that can be introduced in the classrooms. This can be done via e-mail, skype, twitter,
facebook or MSN. Students and teachers must be willing to embrace new technology and to grow. While fashionable teaching methodologies come and go, the teaching situation in Asia is generally similar, with large class sizes and limited resources. Rather than dismissing teaching methodologies, such as grammar translation, drills, practices and also the chalk-and-talk method of teaching, it is important to highlight that such methodologies may have useful applications when they are combined with other factors such as students’ backgrounds, language proficiency levels, preferences, topics taught, objectives of the lesson, future needs for English, teachers, schools, culture, etc. It is suggested that the teaching process implements technology in the ESL classroom apart from combining the traditional and modern teaching practices.

Further recommendations and follow-up activities are to get students present what they have found (poster or findings) about other countries using ICT tools such as a blog, a wiki or a podcast, and shared with the e-pal buddies (Dudeney&Hockly 2007: pp 68-69). In this way, there is an integration of e-mail into the ESL curriculum. If the classes are large, the teacher could divide the students into two large groups so that there are two presentations happening simultaneously. Apart from that, a ‘culture box’ of real objects can be posted to the partner class, and might include audio tapes of favorite English songs, advertisements from magazine, food labels containing English and photos of the group which also serve as authentic materials for learning. This makes the other participating groups more ‘real’ to each other. At the end of any presentations, a suggestion is that the teacher could have a prize category or a token for the presentations the class vote ‘prizes’ for whose presentations was the most: full of facts, visually attractive, amusingly presented, well researched.

By this methodology of learning, students’ "ownership" of the project as writers, respondents, researchers, negotiators and judges emerge and they end up learning to write for audience. In addition, the project can enhance continuity growth in the aspect of cultural awareness and lifelong learning. Therefore, what comes out from this study for the students is that the students will promote better understanding of cultural expressions among the peoples of the world and at the same time language learning takes place.
FUTURE RESEARCH

More researches can be done in the future based on the results gathered in this research. As this research only involved the communication of two classrooms between the USA and Malaysia, the future researches can involve the same concept but with different classrooms and sites but with a purpose of enhancing language skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening) and also developing cultural awareness. They are communication among schools under the supervision of a teacher, i.e. between:

i) Students in Grade A school (more than thousand students are enrolled) and Grade B school (less than thousand students are enrolled);

ii) Students in a rural school and an urban/suburban school. Students who do not have access to the internet at home could always go to cyber café or the internet café nearest to them;

iii) Students from different states in Grade A (or Grade B) schools, e.g. Penang and Negeri Sembilan;

iv) Students, from different ethnic groups, who are studying in different schools;

v) Students from Malaysia and other countries whose main language is not English, e.g. China or Japan.

vi) Two cohorts of students; one of which is a one-to-one communication and the other is a one-to-many communication;

vii) More respondents for a larger period of time and

viii) Respondents that use other social sites i.e. twitter, facebook, skype and MSN.

Relatively, there has been little done to study on how students’ writing could be improved through the use of e-mail (Lepeintre, 1995; Stroble, 1987; Tella, 1992; Yoder, 1991). While there is a growing body of literature providing suggestions for classroom applications (Dik, 1986; Kumpf, 1986; Rosenthal, 1991; Warschauer, 1995) and investigating affective variables related to classroom uses (Ingram, 1987; Tella, 1991), there is also an acute need for empirical research on the potential effects of using e-mail on students’ language acquisition and its impact on writing.
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