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JUDUL: THE IMPACT OF CHAT LANGUAGE IN WRITING AMONG SECONDARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SANDAKAN

IJAZAH: SARJANA PENDIDIKAN TESL

SAYA LOH PUI LING @ MONICA LOH SESI PENGAJIAN: 2005/2007
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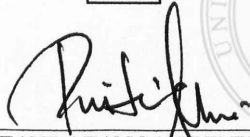
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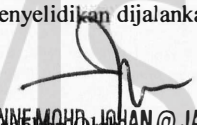
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the materials in this dissertation is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Loh Pui Ling", is written over a horizontal dotted line.

LOH PUI LING @ MONICA LOH
PS06-006(K)-053



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NAME : **LOH PUI LING @ MONICA LOH**
MATRIC NO : **PS05-006(K)-053**
TITLE : **THE IMPACT OF CHAT LANGUAGE IN WRITING AMONG
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SANDAKAN**
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VIVA DATE : **24 MAY 2007**

This dissertation has been accepted by The Centre for Postgraduate Studies and School of Education & Social Development for the partial fulfilment/ requirement of Master of Education (TESL) programme in year 2007.

DECLARED BY:

1. **SUPERVISOR**
DR. HAMZAH MD. OMAR

.....
Date: *June, 2007*

2. **DEAN**
PROF. MADYA DR. ZULKIFLI MOHAMED

.....
Date:

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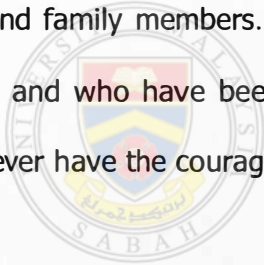
"No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helps you."

Althea Gibson Darben

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To my mother and family members....they have been very patient with me during this course of study, and who have been very supportive with what I am doing. Without them, I would never have the courage to carry on with this.



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ABSTRACT

This study discusses interaction on 'Internet Relay Chat', the synchronous computer-mediated communication system available on the internet. This paper studies the linguistic characteristics of the new medium of synchronous computer-mediated communication called Internet Relay Chat (IRC). With thousands of people using it from all over the world at any time, IRC is undoubtedly one of the most popular chat systems in the world today. Malaysian teenagers are no exceptions to the exposure of this new technology. This research is focused predominantly on the ethnographic and communicational aspects of IRC such as its characteristics, mixing languages while chatting and its impact on English Language Usage. The study focused on Form Four and Form Five students from three secondary schools in Sandakan. The results of the study have shown the special characteristics of IRC that is the usage of short forms, abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons and slang which are understood by chatters all over the world. The findings also revealed that a considerable amount of code switching occur among Malaysian students during chat. Nevertheless, there is the fear that chat language may penetrate and have a negative influence on formal writing in the future.



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ABSTRAK

Projek ini adalah mengenai interaksi pengguna di 'Internet Relay Chat' (IRC) yang merupakan salah satu jenis sistem komunikasi melalui computer. Kertas ini bertujuan mengkaji ciri-ciri linguistik yang terdapat dalam sistem komunikasi IRC. Dengan adanya beribu-ribu pengguna IRC pada satu masa yang tertentu, maka tidak dapat dinafikan bahawa sistem komunikasi ini sangat popular di seluruh dunia pada masa kini. Anak-anak remaja di Malaysia juga tidak terkecuali daripada pendedahan teknologi baru ini. Kajian ini berfokus kepada aspek etnografi dan interaksi di IRC seperti ciri-ciri bahasa, penukaran kod atau bahasa rojak serta kesannya terhadap penulisan pelajar. Kajian ini difokuskan kepada pelajar-pelajar Tingkatan empat dan lima daripada tiga buah sekolah Bandar di Sandakan. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa IRC mempunyai ciri-ciri linguistik tertentu seperti penggunaan singkatan perkataan, akronim, emotikon dan slanga yang difahami oleh pengguna 'chat room' di seluruh dunia. Selain itu, kajian ini juga menunjukkan wujudnya penukaran kod di kalangan pelajar-pelajar Malaysia semasa berkomunikasi melalui IRC. Dapatan daripada soal selidik yang diberikan kepada pelajar-pelajar menunjukkan mereka dapat membezakan antara bahasa formal dan tidak formal semasa menulis karangan atau esei. Ini menunjukkan pelajar-pelajar tersebut tidak menyalahgunakan kebebasan bahasa internet semasa berada dalam konteks formal.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

L2	Second language
CMC	Computer-mediated communication
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
CA	Conversation Analysis
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah
CALL	Computer Assisted Language Learning
OP	Operator
FTF	Face-to-face



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the introduction of computer into the classroom has lead to a heightened interest into its use in second language learning. The possibilities for computer enhanced language learning have been on the forefront of educational studies. Warschauer (1998) states that "even a cursory glance at the programs of regional and national conferences of language teachers indicates that the number of presentations related to online learning has expanded geometrically in recent years".

With the emergence of internet, it has given rise to a new form of communication, called the Internet Relay Chat, which is also known as IRC. It was started by Jarkko Oikarinen in 1988 at the University of Oulu, Finland, (Tammie Yamada tsyamada @ acs.ucalgary.ca). IRC is considered an interactive service on the internet which allows people to interact in channels to communicate in groups or pairs. IRC is different from electronic mail (e-mail) in the sense that IRC is synchronous in nature with minimal delay between turns. It is like a face-to-face communication occurring in 'real' time similar to a conversation over the telephone. Synchronous communication refers to real time communication, that is, interaction with live audiences. This kind of communication can be enhanced with voice and a web camera. With modern equipment, communicators not only able to receive messages but also can hear and see the other participants.

Almeida d' Eca (2002) in his online article, 'To chat or not to chat in the EFL classroom' (<http://www.malhatlantica.pt/teresadeca/papers/evora2002/chat-and-efl.htm>) defines IRC as: *"A two way synchronous form of CMC, a dialogue in real time as we use keyboard to speak our words, an online conversation between two or more people by means of computer."*

IRC breaks away from the traditional conventions of communication where it only uses words to communicate and allows participants to be anonymous. As defined by Oxford English Dictionary, the word "chat" brings the meaning "to talk" in an informal and friendly manner. Chatters use an informal mode of chatting which comprises of short phrases, abbreviations and slang to emulate a face to face conversation. Thus, the language in a chat cannot be compared to the language in formal academic writing. Furthermore, non-verbal cues, that are an integral part of face to face communication are absent in chats. Therefore, this study focused predominantly on ethnographic and interactional aspects of this electronic discourse such as group language, characteristics as short forms, slang, abbreviations, acronyms and code switching among the users.

1.1 Background of the Study

The dawn of a new technology gives birth to alternative options and creative energy. Thus, the word-based form of communication has brought about a significant change in the English language usage, particularly among the teenagers. The use of global communication networks such as e-mail and chats are increasing significantly. In particular, the secondary school students in Malaysia, as a "computer generation" have great interest in computer chatting and enjoy networked communication even outside the classroom, even in their first language.

As Elizabeth Reid (1991) describes: "The structure of the IRC causes its users to deconstruct the conventional boundaries defining social interaction". Chat language is usually made up of short phrases, slang, jargons, emoticons (emotional icons), nicknames, and code switching which occurs liberally. Speed is an important factor which makes people involved in a chat respond and type at varying speeds. As such, statements received and displayed in a chat session may not appear in a precise, logical order which makes chat language very different from academic writing.

In this study, Form Four and Form Five students have been targeted, as teenagers between the age of 14 and 17 comprise one of the target groups who

chat on-line. As linguists have pointed out, technology is integrated into groups of higher socio-economic population more rapidly than others, therefore, form four and form five students from three urban schools would be selected to answer the questionnaires. The students' questionnaire is labelled as Questionnaire 1 (Appendix A).

1.2 Statement of Problem

The art of writing is slowly diminishing among teenagers in terms of sentence structure and grammar competence. Chat language, a special lingo, which incorporates emoticons, abbreviations, acronyms and code switching is a contributing factor. The spoken discourse among teenagers too has taken a turn where they tend to use acronyms and abbreviations. These are understood only by their age group who are familiar with this kind of language. This kind of language is also known as '*netspeak*'.

This study aims to identify the characteristics of chat language and code switching in chat language by Malaysian teenagers and its influence on English language in Malaysia.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study looks into the linguistic variations that take place in chat rooms within Malaysia. In particular, it sets out to study the linguistic variations used by Malaysian teenager students in chat language. It also sets out to look for incidences of code switching in chats. Therefore, the objectives of this research are:

- i) to identify the characteristics of chat language.
- ii) to determine the existence of code switching in chats.
- iii) to determine the influence of chat language on students' writing skills

This investigation aims to contribute a research on non-Western Internet practices. It contributes to the knowledge of linguistic features used on the Malaysian-based Internet.

Malaysia is a multilingual society made up from speakers of various languages and dialects. Online language use can provide insights into how Internet users employ the various linguistic and cultural resources at hand in response to changes in their mode of communication. By examining chat language, this study gives insight into the Internet medium and the multilingual situation in Malaysia that contribute to the emergence of linguistic practices unique to the Malaysia-based internet.

1.4 Research Questions

With reference to the objectives of this study, the following are the research questions of this study:

- i) What are the characteristics of chat language?
- ii) Is there evidence of code switching in chats?
- iii) Does chat language have an impact on students' writing skills?

1.5 Significance of Study

This study is carried out to gain knowledge of the emergence of the new lingo 'chat language'. As an English language teacher, it will be essential for the researcher to identify chat language characteristics. This will also demonstrate how language variations in IRC could possibly influence students' writing skills. It identified students' opinions and views on whether these characteristics can influence their writing skills. Knowledge on chat language will help language teachers to come up with solutions to overcome the problem of deviations from Standard English among teenagers in writing, for example, the use of short phrases, acronyms and abbreviations. The findings of this study will be of importance to linguists and language teachers as it will help them to understand the positive and negative impact of this new technology. It is hoped to give insights to academicians as to the use of chat rooms as a means of communicating with students and understanding their problems in language studies.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

There is a vast amount of information regarding computer-mediated communication and language learning. This study, therefore, is limited in scope, making references to synchronous communication as opposed to asynchronous communication and focusing mainly on CMC in the second language classroom, more specifically in the secondary school classroom. In order for the scope of the study to remain manageable, researcher only looked into the characteristics of the chat language used and the presence of code switching. This will limit the generalisation of the findings and future research on other speech acts areas is needed.

Despite the limitations of the size of the samples, this study attempts to follow the appropriate procedure for the evaluation. It is hoped that the findings will shed some light to identify the chat language characteristics, code switching and the impact of this new lingo among students. Hence, the data analysis will enable the researcher to answer the research questions.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 IRC (Internet Relay Chat)

IRC (Internet Relay Chat) is a virtual meeting place where people from all over the world can meet and talk; you'll find the whole diversity of human interests, ideas, and issues here, and you'll be able to participate in group discussions on one of the many thousands of IRC channels, on hundreds of IRC networks, or just talk in private to family or friends, wherever they are in the world. (<http://www.mirc.com>)

IRC is an example of a synchronous communication program and is available to anyone with access to a client program and who can log on to any one of the IRC servers located across the internet.

IRC can involve large, international groups of people, many of whom may be strangers. Real-time electronic chat is commonly used for recreation and social chat is commonly used for recreation and social interaction. On IRC, both

topic and tone of discussion is monitored only by the participants, with the result that a shared culture has gradually developed that defines communication norms and conventions somewhat different than they are in face to face conversations.

Chat rooms are synchronous on-line communication. The use of synchronous electronic communication program is relatively new. The more common use of synchronous chat programs among school students is to communicate with one another for social and recreational purposes. Public IRC is a text-based, international, message-handling program on many Internet servers. Multiple communication channels (similar to citizens band radio channels) can be created and named (sometimes fancifully) by their creators. Generically, these channels are variously designated as 'chat lines' or 'chat rooms' and encompass discussion on every conceivable topic. Access via a client program allows users to join and listen in on (read) conversations on multiple channels on multiple servers. With experience, four or five different channels can be attended to at any one time. Users join the channel(s) of their choice and type in their conversational contributions, one line at a time, the conversation is distributed, via the servers, to all those who are logged on and listening to (reading) that particular channels.

1.7.2 Chat Room Channels

On IRC, two or three hundred users can be the normal population; therefore it is necessary to devise a way of allowing users to decide whose activity they want to see and who they want to make aware of their own activity. The answer is 'channels'. On entering the IRC program, the user is not at first able to see the activity of other connected users, to do so, one must join a channel.

Channels are created or connected by users issuing a command to the IRC program to join a channel. If there is already a channel with a specified name in operation, then the user is added to the list of people communicating within that channel; if such a channel does not exist, then IRC opens a new channel containing the name of the user who invoked it, who may then be connected to other users. The user can issue commands requesting a list of the users connected to IRC and the channels, they are attached to. IRC keeps track

of participants in all channels, and ensures that only people within the same channel can see each others' typed messages. IRC can support an unlimited number of channels.

Channels can have any name, but generally the name of the channel indicates the nature of the conversation being carried out within it.

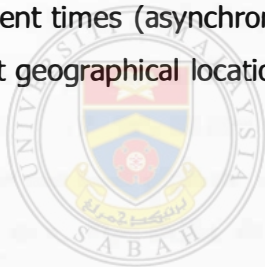
A user may instruct IRC to limit the usage of a channel to a certain number of users. A user may also limit the entry to a channel only to people specifically invited by him or her. On the other hand, a channel can be made invisible to other users by specifying its exclusion from the list of active channels that a user may request of IRC. Apart from these commands, a user may 'kick' another user off the channel. IRC supports numerous other commands. Once a channel has been activated, everything that the user types will be by default and sent to all other occupants of the channel. It is possible, however, to alter that default setting by issuing commands to direct a message to a particular user, users, channel or channels. A number of other commands, the ability to send messages to all users or to kick a user off the IRC system entirely, are reserved for IRC operators, or '*opers*', the people who run and maintain the IRC network connections. *Ops* also have access to special commands related to the technical implementation of IRC.

IRC is not an 'official' program. There are a few 'official' programs on the Internet. Most are simply programs that a group of people, who have access to the Internet, have decided to install on these machines. IRC operators are people who have chosen to invest the time needed to set up and maintain the IRC program on their local machines for the benefit of others local users. IRC, then is a multi-user synchronous communications system. It allows people to choose which person or group of people they wish to see the activity of, and to whom they wish their own activity to be transmitted. IRC, the whole Internet, forms a 'virtual reality'. Within this breeding ground, users of IRC invent new concepts of culture and interaction, and challenge the conventions of both.

1.7.3 Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)

CMC can be broadly defined as "human communication via computer" (Higgins, 1991). It involves interaction between humans using computers to connect to each other and generally refers to "any communication pattern mediated through the computer" (Metz, 1994). What is significant is that the communication takes place "*through* a computer between human beings, instead of *to* an already determined computer system" (Ferrara et. al, 1991). It is the process of exchanging thoughts, ideas and information via a computer keyboard and screen connected to other computers (Lewis, Whitaker and Julian, 1995). CMC has been employed in language learning classrooms in various forms. Levy (1997) identifies some of the technological platforms in the use of CMC evident in the CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) literature such as the e-mail, listservers, newsgroups, bulletin boards, internet relay chat and computer conferencing.

Communication in a CMC environment can be real time (Synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous) with learners situated in the same venue or at different geographical locations (Levy, 1997).



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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is a new field which is gaining the interest of linguists all over the world (particularly the IRC). There are some researchers who pioneered studies on chats where their interests are mainly in the development of a 'new culture' in the field of linguistics. This section will look at related research in this area. The literature review is an overview of the literature found both in print and online. This section will give a brief background of IRC and nature of chats. It also looks at similarities and differences between face-to-face conversation and IRC, and the communicative purposes of code switching.

2.1 Theoretical Bases of CMC

Among the first few studies to evaluate the merits of using CMC to enhance the language learning process was done by Batson and Peyton (Egbert et.al, 1999) in early 80's. The study was conducted on two premises. First it was done to prove Vygotsky's (1934, 1962, 1978 in Egbert et.al 1999) hypothesis that all human learning is mediated through interaction with others. In interaction with parents, peers, and teachers, all learners move in their speaking and thinking, towards stages at which they can function alone. Second, this study was attempted to test Krashen's hypothesis of comprehensible input (1981, 1982 in Ellis, 1995). Krashen claims that learners are able to learn a language if they are put in a surrounding where the language used is slightly beyond their expressive ability. Thus, learners are 'pushed toward the delivery of a message that is conveyed precisely, coherently and appropriately (Egbert et.al 1999).

While many of CMC studies have been conducted in the fields of social psychology and communication (Kiesler et al. 1984, Sproull & Kiesler 1999, Rice

& Love 1987 among others), an increasing number of scholars are inquiring CMC from linguistic perspectives.

Ferrara et al. (1991), for example, investigated the register in synchronous CMC using the networked computer system. In an experimental study in which 23 subjects electronically communicated with one person whom they believed a computer system, they found the high frequency of omission of subject pronouns, articles, and abbreviations of words. From these results, Ferrara et al. (1991) maintain that written communication like CMC demonstrates not only characteristics of written language but also those of spoken language.

Werry (1996) examined characteristics of another type of synchronous CMC, Internet Relay Chat (IRC). He identified various linguistic conventions, for example, abbreviations and orthographic strategies to textually convey paralinguistic and prosodic cues and actions. He attributes the emergence of these linguistic features to constraints imposed by the medium of IRC. Because typing is much slower than speaking, making a message short and reducing keystrokes are effective strategies in order for IRC users to respond quickly and keep up with the flow of conversation. In addition, a complex set of linguistic devices to reproduce nonverbal behaviours in texts is ascribed to the lack of visual and audio channels in IRC. Werry (1996) argues that these conventions reflect IRC users' attempts not only to overcome the constraints in IRC, but also to make conversations in IRC as close to face-to-face conversations as possible. Furthermore, it is claimed that this tendency to approximate speech results in highly colloquial language use.

Another linguistic inquiry into synchronous CMC was carried out by Cherny (1999) in IRC. One of the major findings in her study is that IRC users have invented and shared a variety of linguistic features, like those in Werry's (1996) study. She found a tendency toward simplifications for examples contractions, deletion of the finite copulae from predicative sentences and progressives in order to speed up transmission. Her study also revealed attempts by IRC users not only to simulate nonverbal gestures but also to narrate their real-life actions in text-only CMC by using the simple present tense.