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Learner autonomy via Asynchronous Online Interactions: A Malaysian perspective

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ABSTRACT

The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in course offerings in institutions of higher learning (IHLs) is the catalyst towards empowering learners to become autonomous lifelong learners. In an effort to produce quality and independent learners, Learning Management Systems (LMS) are seen as a means to assist educators in developing quality online internet based courses and websites as well as to fulfil students' needs in acquiring information anywhere and anytime. This paper explores the Malaysian perspective in addressing issues and challenges faced by adult learners in IHLs to keep abreast with this latest trend. This research paper is based on a pilot study that investigated learner autonomy via a distance learning programme in a local university in Malaysia. Initial findings indicated that first-year students lacked the confidence needed to learn autonomously. Even though they showed some confidence in planning, results indicated they needed help in organising, monitoring and evaluating their learning. If students are required to participate in asynchronous online learning, necessary steps have to be taken to ensure they are empowered with the necessary skills and tools to help them manage their own learning for their journey to become lifelong autonomous learners.

Keywords: *Learner autonomy; computer-mediated communication; asynchronous online interactions; adult learners; learning management system.*

INTRODUCTION

The demand for new delivery systems and learning media has become more urgent as institutions of higher learning (IHLs) struggle to compete for students locally and worldwide. In anticipating a future when more students will require more independent learning, new technologies and opportunities are being developed and explored by IHLs to capture student interest that will allow greater flexibility, autonomy and learner-centredness yet does not diminish students' learning experience. This calls for a change in the way education can and will be delivered. As Gordon highlighted "*the world in which children grow, learn and interact will have significantly different modes of exchange than those of the previous generation*" (2000, p.3). Rising to this call, the dawn of the new millennium in the information age has brought a plethora of new technologies in IHLs. Today, accessing information via the Internet is a common feature in most homes, offices, schools and IHLs. Hence, the use of networked communication technology via Internet and Web in education can no longer be considered optional but a necessity. In response to these educational needs, the latest technological tool to invade IHLs is computer-mediated communication or CMC (Bonk 2004; Harasim 2000; Selwyn 2000; Jonassen 2000).

CMC will play a vital role in empowering individuals towards achieving democratisation of knowledge in education. These technologies will pave the way for new opportunities in online learning environments in the future. The importance of this convergence cannot be denied as it will help more people embrace lifelong learning as a way of acquiring, improving and updating their knowledge or skills throughout life via education, training, work and general life experiences (Rohani 2005). Through the integration of CMC tools in IHLs, it is hoped that ultimately it will pave the way towards creating autonomous lifelong learners capable of controlling their future and destiny in pursuance of continuing professional development over the course of their life span.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alagic et al. (2004) point out that the ultimate goal of adult education is to help them achieve learner autonomy. Yet researchers have over the past two decades debated on a holistic definition of learner autonomy. For instance, Little (2002) notes that it is often confused with other synonyms like self-instruction (Candy 1991), 'andragogy' (Knowles 1983), 'independence' (Sheerin 1991) and 'language awareness' (Lier 1996). Furthermore, others like Benson (2001) debate as to whether learner autonomy should be viewed as a capacity or behavior characterised by learner responsibility or learner control. Little (2002) stresses that autonomous learners accept responsibility for their learning and regularly engage with the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of the learning process. Adding to this discourse, Sinclair and Thang (2009), reiterate that learner autonomy refers to learners who are self-driven, take responsibility for their learning and actively seek new knowledge. They highlighted that there are two kinds of autonomous learners - proactive and reactive autonomous learners. The former refers to learners who actively take control of their own learning whilst the latter suggest learners who are pushed towards various forms of independent learning (Littlewood 1999 cited in Sinclair and Thang 2009).

In lieu with these latest developments in learner autonomy, ideas of learner autonomy which refers to learners' abilities in taking responsibility for the management of their own learning has taken centre stage as the responsibility of learning has shifted from the teacher to the learner. This paradigm shift in learning which is less devoted to rote memorization of facts but more to learner-centredness is dedicated towards promoting independent and self-directed learners. In this context Jones, A.N. (2006) stressed there is a shift from lecturing and telling ("sage on the stage") to facilitating and guiding ("guide on the side"). The overarching principle in this new paradigm shift is to help learners 'learn how to learn'. Learning how to learn means to build up learners' "*capabilities to learn independently (e.g. creative and critical thinking, mastering of information technology, communication), to become self-reflective on how to learn and to be able to use different ways of learning…*" (Curriculum Development Council 2000 p. 3). All these skills have been identified as components of autonomy. One tool that has been closely linked with aiding the development of learner autonomy is CMC. Today, CMC is seen as the hallmark of teaching and learning in IHLs because it has not only transformed the teaching and learning methodologies used in higher education but through its catalytic power has broken down traditional boundaries of teaching and learning and plays a privileged role in developing autonomous learners (Dimaoru G. et al. 2006; Benson 2001; Jonassen 2000).

What then is CMC? According to Simpson, J. (2002), CMC is an umbrella term that subsumes computer based instruction, informatics and human-to-human communication. In short, it refers to human communication via computers. In extending the definition further, CMC entails communication between more than two people and involves technological tools such as radio counselling, teleconferencing, bulletin board systems, Internet, e-mails, online discussions / e-forums, audio-conferencing, interactive messaging (IRC/chat), video conferencing and multi-user

domains (Simpson 2002; Berge 2001; Jonassen 2000). In the realm of CMC, there are basically two modes of web-based communication i.e. asynchronous (delayed, any-time, any-pace, any-place) and synchronous (same time, real time) communication. Compared to synchronous communication, researchers argue that asynchronous communication gives learners more time to reflect on their own ideas, which supports critical thinking and learner autonomy (Swan 2001; Harasim 2000; Jonassen 2000). Today, both these preferred modes of learning, have helped to enhance and support the development of autonomous lifelong learners (Yumuk 2002)

This clearly shows, that in today's wired environment, the need for developing autonomous learners has become more imperative. In fact, many local and foreign IHLs agree that in their quest to develop autonomous learners, the use of computer-mediated communications has expedited this aim. This is because CMC systems have certain inherent features that aid learners towards becoming autonomous learners. Numerous studies have succeeded in pointing out that the purpose of education in formal and non-formal learning environments must seek to develop attitudes that foster the development of autonomous learners. This means that learners must be equipped with a repertoire of skills, competencies, knowledge and attitudes that promote learner autonomy and learner empowerment (Kelly 2007; Ranjit & Mohamed Amin 2007; Ranjit & Gurnam 2006; Hara et al. 1998). For instance, Ranjit and Mohamed Amin (2010) in their study which investigated the roles of Malaysian adult learners in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication found that learners experienced different roles such as initiators-wrappers, task orienters, social discourse networkers, e-collaborators and e-mentors in their quest to seek knowledge and improve their learning skills. In another study, they discovered that in order for Malaysian learners to improve their attitudes, they had to equip themselves with a variety of skills. This was based on the perceptions that asynchronous interactions were not "a synch". Some of these views included facing time constraints, memorising too many facts, assessment woes, questioning what to post, logistics issues, language barriers and inadequate tutor training (Ranjit & Gurnam 2009).

THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Against this backdrop, as Malaysia stands at the threshold of a new era of technological learning, without doubt she has to embrace herself with all these new technological changes if she wants to remain competitive in the global market. So far, the development of networked communications in Malaysia is encouraging. The Malaysian government has targeted to increase the country's broadband penetration rate from two percent of the population to five percent in 2006 and 15 percent in 2010. This is very much in line with Malaysia's wish to become a fully developed country and achieve its Vision 2020 objectives where it hopes that the broadband penetration should be at 50 percent of the population by 2020 (Sani 2004).

Given the dynamics of the global economy, the need for lifelong learners and knowledge workers has never been stronger. Hence, are Malaysian learners equipped with the necessary skills on how to learn to compete in today's competitive global economy? Are IHLs empowering learners with the right skills and competencies for self-directed learning that will enable them to adapt and change with the times? "*By teaching students to reflect on how they learn and by developing their skills to pursue their learning goals, students will be empowered to change from passive recipients of information to active controllers of their learning*" (Klopfenstein 2003). This would most certainly lead learners to take personal responsibility for learning thus empowering them with skills that support lifelong learning. Eventually, this would enable them to be on the cutting edge of technology and allow them to compete in a marketplace that has now become global.

Concurrent with all these ICT developments, IHLs in Malaysia are keeping pace with these latest trends as online learning is currently believed to be a potentially significant area of development in Malaysia. Through all these developments, it is also hoped that students will benefit from course materials made available online. Locally, many institutions of tertiary education and IHLs have taken the first step and are making headway in this new trend. Clearly, staying abreast of the latest developments, partnerships, or opportunities in online learning is not an easy endeavour. In fact, Ziguras (2001, p.6) reported:

> *many educationists see educational technologies as a means to encourage greater self-direction and creativity on the part of students….the appeal of educational technologies is that they will require learners to be more pro-active and autonomous and these personality traits are increasingly important in the 'knowledge economy.*

Therefore, this study is timely as it will contribute to knowledge on the current state of development of online learning in IHLs in Malaysia. The findings will hopefully be a precedent for many more such studies in other colleges and IHLs both locally and globally.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate learner autonomy through asynchronous online interactions via e-mail interactions between learners and their tutor in achieving their learning tasks. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate learner autonomy viz. planning, organising, monitoring and evaluating in achieving their learning tasks. Besides that, learners' views and suggestions relating to using a LMS were also sought.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This descriptive research employed a three-pronged data collection procedure. The procedures employed in this pilot study included administering a survey questionnaire, conducting semi-structured interview protocols and analysing e-mail interactions. Purposive sampling method was the preferred technique as it enabled the researchers to study one intact class of students involved in asynchronous online interactions with their tutor for the B. Ed (TESL) course. The instrument entailed obtaining demographic data and analysing aspects of learner autonomy viz. planning, organising, monitoring and evaluating their learning tasks as well as their views regarding using a LMS as the CMC platform for online learning.

The survey questionnaire was administered once i.e. at the end of the course and conducted in the English language. It was administered to 30 part-time first-year students pursuing the Bachelor in Education (B.Ed.TESL) course at the Faculty of Education in a local private university located in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. This private university employed a blended learning approach in all its course offerings. In short, all courses offered entailed face-to-face (F2F), self-managed learning and e-forums. Students had three academic sessions in a year i.e. January, May and September. The length of each semester varied between 12 and 14 weeks. January and September constituted long semesters (14 weeks) whereas May constituted a short semester (12 weeks). Irrespective of the length of semester, the courses offered were the same in terms of contact hours and course content. The threaded AOI centred mainly on three major areas of discussions i.e. *General, Tutorials* and *Assignment*. In short, all these discussions were related to general topics of discussions, concerning an assignment which course respondents were supposed to download from the Internet and ten topics related to the areas of speaking and

listening in an ESL context provided in the course module. The *Listening and Speaking (LS)* module was provided to each student at the beginning of the semester. This module was used for class tutorial discussions. The tutorial topics were to be discussed over a period of three F2F tutorial sessions between course respondents and their tutor.

Being TESL students their English Language proficiency was considered sufficient to enable them to respond to the questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised a total of 60 items which were divided into three parts. Part 1 of the questionnaire investigated respondents' demographic profile (e.g. age, gender, academic qualifications) and their computer literacy as well as internet access facilities and their preferred modes of communication. Part 2 of the questionnaire required respondents to respond to items using a four-point Likert-scale (*1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly disagree*). This section investigated respondents' abilities in managing their own learning i.e. planning, monitoring, evaluating and computer skills. Finally, Part 3 of the questionnaire attempted to obtain information regarding learners overall views and suggestions regarding AOI (4 items). For the purpose of this study an average mean of 3.0 (agree) indicated a positive perception. The SPSS version 11.5 WIN was used to analyse the information collected statistically. This method of analysis limits to general statistical analysis. Frequencies and descriptive procedures were performed in examining the accuracy of the raw data as the initial step. Descriptive statistics employing measures of central tendency: the mean and measure of dispersion or standard deviation were used to obtain an accurate measurement.

With regards to qualitative data, ten randomly selected respondents formed a "sample within the case" (Merriam 2002). These respondents were interviewed using semi-structured interview protocols. Interviews were deemed appropriate as it provided in-depth understanding, information, perspectives and clarifications regarding respondents' learner autonomy abilities via asynchronous online interactions. The semi-structured interview protocols consisted of three sections. Part A of the interview protocol comprised warm-up questions. That investigated their views, perceptions and feelings regarding the LMS and their participation through AOI. Part B of the interview protocol consisted of specific and core questions relating to their abilities in communicating via the asynchronous online environment and to what extent it had helped them in their learning process namely towards becoming autonomous learners. Hence, the interview questions attempted to get respondents to divulge information regarding their awareness of learning via an online mode vis-à-vis their learner autonomy abilities. In this section the researchers attempted to obtain possible suggestions that would improve the online teaching and learning process via AOI. Ultimately the main purpose of these interview sessions were to permit other aspects of AOI experience to surface as learners interacted via e-mails with each other and towards developing their abilities as autonomous learners.

In addition, e-mail interactions between the tutor (n=1) and her students were also analysed to further trace students' learner autonomy abilities. Acording to Shepherd (2007), e-mail analyses allowed respondents time to compose their messages, enabled all discussions to be recorded to be retrieved later and enabled respondents to communicate without time and place constraints. The threaded AOI centred mainly on three major areas of discussions i.e. *General, Tutorials* and *Assignment.* By monitoring learners' daily threaded interactions via online discussions, the researcher was able to trace how learners communicated, thought, reflected and reacted to accomplish their learning tasks. Putting their thoughts and words to compose text based messages helped learners to further develop and enhance their learner autonomy abilities as well as to improve their computer skills. All qualitative data was analysed using the NVivo Version 7 software. The data from the interview schedule was then triangulated with students' responses from the survey and e-mail interactions between the tutor and her students.

FINDINGS

Demographic Data

A total of 30 respondents participated and returned their questionnaires. An analysis of the population sample of this study indicated that out of the 30 respondents, 60% (18) of the respondents were females as contrasted to males who accounted for about 40% (12) of the total population sample. As for ethnicity, the results showed that 53% (16) of the respondents were Malays, 20% (6) Chinese and 27% (8) were Indians. The average age for adult learners was 32 years.

In this study, students had to use computers to interact through asynchronous modes of communications. Therefore, the study looked into various aspects of computer ownership, skills and usage. Results indicated not every student had access to a computer and the Internet. Only 83% of them owned a computer and were able to access Internet, 17% did not have a computer and thus faced problems accessing the Internet. However, a majority of them i.e. 53% accessed Internet from their homes, 13% accessed it from the university and another 34% accessed Internet either from their work place (office or schools) or cyber cafes. In terms of Internet usage per week, results indicated a low level of Internet usage. On the whole only 13% of them accessed Internet 11-15 hours/week, 40% accessed between 6-10 hours/week and 7% accessed it between 0-5 hours/week. Correspondingly, results indicated that 80% spent less than 3 hours/week on e-mail communications and 20% spent between 4-7 hours/week. This was further corroborated during the interview sessions; respondents indicated that their low levels of communications via e-mail and Internet usage had a lot to do with not having a computer and having limited Internet accessibility. For respondents that depended on accessing Internet at the university and their office the number of hours was limited as they had to divide their time between work, family and participating in asynchronous online interactions. In comparison, for students who were able to gain access from the comfort of their homes this did not pose a problem. Although, some had computers not all had Internet connection facilities in their residential areas.

Results also disclosed respondents' perceptions that they used the computer for completing assignments (45%), downloading software (42%), research (40%), chatting/instant messaging (38%) and Internet (35%). However, online discussions/e-forum/newsgroup (32%), e-mail (32%) and application software (28%) recorded low percentages. Interestingly, the respondents perceived postal mail (50%), chat/IRC (47%) and written memo (45%) to be the most preferred mode of communication. SMS (32%), e-mail (28%) and face-to-face (27%) recorded low percentages. On the other hand, respondents also disclosed that their preferred mode of learning was online conferences (47%), CD-ROM/DVD (43%) and online materials (38%). However, printed (27%) and face-to-face (25%) recorded low percentages. This was also indicated by respondents during the interview sessions. Respondents used the computer mainly to complete their assignments and for research purposes. Even though online conferences and online materials was indicated as the preferred mode of communication, respondents' did not spend much time to communicate with their tutor through online discussions/e-forums and e-mails.

Learner Autonomy Abilities

The survey instrument also looked into respondents' learner autonomy abilities in terms of planning, organising, monitoring and evaluating their learning tasks. Table 1 shows the overall mean and standard deviations of learner autonomy abilities in planning and organising for respondents pursuing the B. Ed (TESL) course.

The results indicated an above average mean among respondents in their abilities to plan i.e. using planners/diaries/time tables to set their learning goals (mean=3.00, SD=.54) and their ability to locate suitable materials for their learning (mean=3.00, SD=.54). However, a below average mean was recorded for other aspects relating to planning such as forming their own learning objectives (mean=2.67, SD=.76), ability to decide on the time to achieve their learning goals (mean=2.87, SD=.68). In the aspect of organising their learning tasks, a below average mean was recorded for the following aspects i.e. having difficulty in deciding on techniques to accomplish learning tasks (mean=2.67, SD=.76) and needing help from friends on how to learn (mean=2.87, SD=.68).

Table 1*: Learner Autonomy Abilities in Planning and Organising (N = 30)*

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Planning	2.88	.68
Organising	2.77	.87

Scale used: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree

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Table 2*: Learner Autonomy Abilities in Monitoring and Evaluating (n = 30)*

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Monitoring	2.24	.75
Evaluating	2.56	.85

Scale used: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree

Table 2 shows the overall mean and standard deviation of learner autonomy abilities in monitoring and evaluating. In their ability to monitor their learning tasks, respondents recorded a below average mean score in the following aspects; how to check their own learning progress (mean=2.80, SD=.51), having difficulty in correcting themselves in the learning tasks (mean=2.67, SD=.76), how to verify their performance in the learning tasks (mean=2.67, SD=.76), expecting the tutor to be at hand to guide them in their learning tasks (mean=2.53, SD=.84), needing friends and tutor to help them overcome problems in their learning tasks (mean=2.80, SD=.51) and finally not being able to make their own decisions in achieving their learning tasks (mean=2.21, SD=.72). Finally, in their ability to evaluate, respondents' further recorded a below average mean score. Respondents indicated that they were afraid to evaluate their own performance of a learning task (mean=2.40, SD=.73). They also indicated that they needed regular feedback from their tutor about their performance (mean=2.80, SD=.54). Furthermore, they indicated that challenging learning tasks discouraged them from performing well (mean=2.40, SD=.73) and admitted that they barely had time to check and improve the errors in their assignments (mean =2.53, SD=.84).

The overall results indicated that the first year tertiary students' planning abilities stood at a mean of 2.9 (SD=.68) whereas their ability to organise their own learning stood at a mean of 2.8 (SD=.87). However, they felt that they were not able to monitor (mean=2.2, SD=.75) and evaluate (mean=2.6, SD=.85) their own learning. When asked to rate whether they were independent learners the mean score recorded was below average (mean=2.46, SD=.86) thus suggesting that they were not confident of their own ability at managing their own learning (mean=2.21, SD=.72).

Computer skills

Since this study entailed students having to interact asynchronously via e-mails with their tutor, the researchers sought to explore students' computer skills (Table 3). First, some contradictory results were obtained. Even though students had registered for an online learning course they still held fast to the fact that face-to-face learning was more effective than online learning (mean=3.13, SD=.52). Nevertheless, they were able to use the Web to locate suitable learning materials (mean=3.21, SD=.58), able to use the Internet to retrieve relevant text based information for their coursework (mean=3.13, SD=.52) and using a computer for online learning had improved their computing skills (mean=3.00, SD=.53). However, other aspects that related to computer skills that recorded a below average score were aspects such as needing help to access latest course materials (mean=2.33, SD=1.11), not being able to use the computer easily (mean=2.93, SD=.88), the ability to access multimedia materials for their learning tasks (mean=2.80), overcoming technical problems (mean=2.87, SD=.74), using a computer to interact with friends and tutor anytime and anywhere (mean=2.53, SD=.74) and using the computer helps them learn more effectively (mean=2.85, SD=.55). On the whole, respondents rated their computer skills as low (mean=2.33, SD=1.11) towards becoming independent learners. These findings were further corroborated with data obtained from interview sessions. The respondents indicated that they lacked computer skills in using application software i.e. Power Point and Excel, Internet search, multimedia skills and using the online digital library. These were again surprising as they had registered with a university that runs online courses via distance learning.

***Table 3**: Students' Computer Skills*

Items	Mean	SD
Face-to-face learning is more effective than online learning	3.13	.74
I am able to use the Web to search for suitable learning materials	3.21	.58
I am able to use the Internet to retrieve relevant text based information for my coursework	3.13	.52
Using a computer for online learning had improved my computing skills	3.00	.54
I need help in using the computer to access latest course materials	2.33	1.11
I know how to use a computer easily	2.93	.88
I know how to access multimedia materials for my learning tasks	2.80	.51
Technical problems hinder my online learning	2.87	.74
I use a computer to interact with friends and tutor anytime and anywhere	2.53	.74
Using the computer helps me learn more effectively	2.85	.55

Scale used: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree

Issues and Challenges

Respondents' responses when triangulated via the survey instrument, semi-structured interview protocols and through the analysis of e-mail interactions highlighted some interesting issues and challenges.

Generally, respondents indicated that they had no problem in sending e-mails (mean=3.50, SD=.48), knew how to participate in online discussions (mean=3.27, SD=.54) and perceived that both these modes of communications enhanced their communication skills (mean=3.14, SD=.52). However, one issue that caused considerable dissatisfaction was timely feedback from their tutor. This finding paralleled Williams & Moster's study (2005). A majority of the respondents (78%) expected their tutor to be more prompt to their queries posted via e-mail. Respondents also felt tutors should be more interactive when conducting discussions (mean=3.14, SD=.78). In fact, 63% of the respondents indicated that their tutor seldom responded promptly to their questions via e-mails. This study divulged that their tutor took longer than a week to respond to students' e-mail. Hence, Respondent 9 said he felt "*very anxious and frustrated"* and opined that the tutor should respond immediately when the student posted an e-mail message. Respondent 8 expressed that she was "*irritated because we have assignment datelines…and not replying promptly will make students demotivated.*" Respondent 6, said that he was "*frustrated as work comes to a standstill when the tutor do not respond and we cannot proceed for fear that we may be on the wrong track*." Generally, respondents indicated that they were happy when their tutor responded to their online queries promptly.

The second issue of concern among respondents was the lack of time to participate in asynchronous online interactions (mean=2.60, SD=.85). Since all the respondents were part-time students, some of them had to learn how to manage their time between work, family and pursuing an online degree. Therefore, instead of taking ownership to manage their own learning, 70% (mean=2.80, SD=.51) of the respondents felt that their tutor and friends were responsible for the success of their online learning. In fact, participating in online interactions was not to fulfill the "want" but more to fulfill the "need" because according to Respondent 7 most of the students are "forced to go online because of the 5% marks."

Furthermore, an analysis of e-mail and online interactions indicated that a majority of the postings did not show reflective thinking or in-depth discussions of real issues but rather surface and literal level issues and questions. Respondents' discussions merely touched on content issues, wanting clarifications, elaborations, confirmation of learning tasks such as assignment datelines and exam details from the tutor. Respondent 10 felt that "*the level of participation should improve in terms of quality of messages*" whilst Respondent 12 mentioned that "some students simply join to say hi or hello to each other'. This finding suggests that there is a need for tutor(s) to aid and guide students in sending quality messages related to their coursework.

Another issue that arose was that 47% of the respondents indicated their lack of proficiency in the English language hindered them from participating in asynchronous online interactions. This was further confirmed through interviews. "*My English is poor, I feel shy and embarrassed to communicate with my tutor*" said Respondent 5. Respondent 1 was afraid that the tutor "*may find fault and minus marks if I make errors when writing the message"* whereas Respondent 3 admitted that "*I just like to read the messages because I can improve my English…I don't know how to reply to the messages or to give feedback?*"

Respondents also voiced their dissatisfaction on a number of issues related to ICT aspects. Their grievances ranged from technical to hardware and content related matters in certain aspects of the asynchronous online interactions platform. Respondent 12 indicated that he had trouble to gain access to the digital library and online references. Finally, Respondent 7 lamented on the fact that there was "*no 'hands-on' training to provide learners on how to effectively participate in asynchronous online interactions*". This suggests that on the part of the administrators there is a need to ensure that all first-year students who intend to embark on an online learning course are provided with the necessary computer and literacy skills as well as knowledge on trouble shooting so as to enable them to become better managers of their learning.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary pilot study investigated the perspectives of Malaysian adult learners as they pursued an online degree programme. The pilot study aimed to investigate to what extent email interactions i.e. one mode of AOI helped learners develop learner autonomy. Results in this one-month long pilot study indicated that first-year university students not only lacked confidence to manage their own learning but also needed to upgrade their computing abilities. Without having these learning tools students may not be able to reap the true benefits offered by today's 'wired enterprises' in universities all around the globe. On top of that, this study also indicated that tutor(s) were not keeping to their side of the bargain. They failed to give prompt reply to students' e-mails. One need to understand that for learners to benefit from quality asynchronous online interactions an effective follow-up system backed by dedicated educators must always go hand-in-hand. If not students are going to be frustrated and distant learning will fail.

These findings indicated that perhaps IHLs need to relook into the needs of students launching into open and distance learning (ODL) courses. First and foremost, steps must be taken to help empower learners with the ability to manage their own learning. Henceforth, learners must be helped so that they are equipped with the right learning tools such as having the ability, knowledge and skills to plan, organise, monitor and evaluate their own learning before embarking on an online learning experience. More importantly, they must have the desired computing skills to enable them to participate effectively in asynchronous learning environments. Educators and administrators must also ensure that support is provided to learners for online internet based courses and websites. Students should have easy access to good running systems that will fulfill students' needs in acquiring information at their fingertips anywhere and anytime without the frustrations of system failures or poor connections.

What we can conclude from this preliminary pilot study is that asynchronous online interactions have the potential to aid online learners develop autonomy. Nevertheless a longitudinal study would lend further credence to such a claim. One however, needs to take into consideration that learner autonomy can only be effectively enhanced if training of skills, knowledge and attitude are included at the initial phase of all online distant learning programmes. At this juncture it is pertinent to bear in mind what Allwright (1988) highlighted. He stressed that no matter 'how infertile the soil may be in the whole-class environment' we can always find seeds of autonomy. We need to understand the fact that very few learners are spontaneously self-directed or autonomous. Therefore, it is the responsibility of educators to systematically guide and provide learners the skills and knowledge through learner training programmes on how they can learn to take responsibility for their own learning. Once learners have been equipped with the right learning tools they can learn to take responsibility for their own learning and perhaps they will be empowered to participate more effectively in today's online learning experiences (Ranjit & Mohd. Amin 2007).

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