

# Exploring the Internet Usage for English Language Learning

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**Abstract:** *In this article, I discuss the idea about how Information and Communication Technologies – particularly the internet- can be developed as a tool to support independent learning. From my point of view, both new media and education are closely connected. Moreover, the internet has several functions that might be explored for academic purposes. Although there are some possibilities of using internet as a tool to learn English, it might not be easy to implement this idea in Indonesian universities because of various problems caused by cultural background, educational institution, government, community, also student's and teacher's perspectives. This paper explains these complexities in five parts: introduction; literature review; analysis; solutions; and conclusions which all are connected to the concepts of language, culture and identity.*

**Key words:** *internet, education, English language learning, academic activities*

In this globalization era, English is considered a powerful language in the world to transfer information and technology. Wallraff (2000) in *What Global Language* claims that English has become an *official language* in many non-English speaking countries even the number of people speak English is lower than Chinese, Hindi and Urdu. Therefore, people concern more with the importance of learning English. This idea is supported by Jordan (2002), who describes that in non-English speaking countries English is taught in various courses such as *English as a Foreign Language (EFL)*; *English as a Second*

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On one hand, some people argue that the global status of English can not be separated from its other popular role as the language of science and technology (Jazadi, 2004). Similarly, Slack and Wise (2006) in *Cultural Studies and Communication Technology* emphasise that technology and language are strongly connected in the society. On the other hand, new media -particularly internet- may play important role in popularizing English as a global language. Walter Ong (1982 as cited in Swenson et.al., 2006) notes that '*technologies aren't just changing our lived conditions, they are changing the way that we think*'. Several experts also mention that '*an examination of literacy practices involving technologies deserves special attention, not because they are separate, but because they are central to effective English education in a rapidly changing world*' (Swenson et. al. 2006). Furthermore, Leu (2005) states that the Internet and other newer technologies have linked to literacy issues including English education.

## **INTERNET AND ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES**

Since sixty years ago, mass media tend to be parts of people's daily activities. Newspapers, magazines, tabloids, televisions and radio programs have been popular as sources of information, education and entertainment. Nowadays the concept of mass media is transformed into new media.

Most of new media definitions are directly linked to *Information Communication and Technologies (ICT)* and focus on their technological features (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). Kress (2003) describes new media as the transformation from traditional print-based media to the new information and communication technologies. Furthermore, he develops two characteristics of new media. First, new media tend to use multiplicity modes, such as moving pictures, music, and sound effects. Second, new media are interactive and broadly interpersonal. For instance, Mackay (1997) classifies some types of new media, including personal computers, mobile phones, fax machines, Internet, and other interactive media. In responding to this issue, Rice and associates (1984 as cited in Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006:21) argue:

“...those communication technologies, typically involving computer capabilities (microprocessor or mainframe), that allow or facilitate interactivity among users or between users and information.”

In research about the relationship between Internet and academic activities, Roy Morgan Survey (1998 as cited in Burton, 1999) found that young audiences were identified as heavy internet users. This result is supported by Curtis (1998) who claims that the youth are interested in online chat and sites which consist of reviews of CDs and videos. Additionally, the majority of youth uses internet for playing games, doing research for school or university, browsing and creating own web pages online.

In relation to youth and social activity, Burton (1998) and Sternberg (1997) both agree that young people want more opportunities to create their own media and to express their views as important members of a civil society. Similar finding also stated by Tapscott (1997) that young users usually access the Internet to play, find out their world, engage with various identities, communicate themselves through own web pages, extend relationship with friends and family, and get socialized. In '*Internet and teens' identity formation*', Frangoulidou (2003) identifies that Internet provides different functions such as communication, information, education and entertainment. He also claims that the Internet users have choices either to present their real identities or create new ones. Additionally, a user might present different identities at the same time.

Other researchers, Maddel and Muncer (2005) investigated the internet and mobile phone communication activities among young people. They argue that the Internet users' social networks are larger and more active than those of non-users. Furthermore, several Internet search engines have already focused more on social connectivity rather than content by providing email; chat rooms; e-groups; instant messaging; and personal spaces.

In relation to the concept of *academic activities*, American Online (AOL) survey in United States -as reported in '*The Internet at Home and in School*' - found that most students took advantages of the internet to improve language skills, get help with homework and get access to the library and other sources (American Online reports 2000 as cited in Rice & Haythornthwaite, 2006). This study also states that the youth as participants feel being a better student by doing online activities.

Hamman (1999) adds that Internet communication complements real-world relations. Furthermore, in *Perspective on Internet Use: Access, Involvement and Interaction*, Rice and Haythornthwaite (2006) describe that students can use Internet for various purposes such as doing research; communicating with friends and family; getting information about products to buy; getting news; getting health information; sending/receiving pictures to and from family/friends; getting re-connected with the people.

## **USING INTERNET FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING**

In his research, Jazadi (2004) argues that students may be successful in learning English by practicing this language out-of classroom. At least two studies (Pickard, 1996 and Lamb, 2002 as cited in Jazadi, 2004) show that students might develop English language skills through reading novels, newspapers, magazines, books; listening to a variety of English radio and television programs; creating an English club and using Internet.

While exploring the functions of the Internet in general, they may offer opportunities for educators to increase knowledge; communicate with colleagues; get access to teaching materials and share resources. On the other hand, students may also take benefits from using Internet such as developing research skills, having interactive learning, communicating with other students and getting better understanding of global issues.

In specific terms of Internet usage and English language learning, the Internet may offer at least two benefits. First, the English language learner may have a direct contact with native speakers. Second, there are various English teaching/learning materials that can be obtained from the Internet such as communication games, grammar exercises, newspapers, and magazines.

From another point of view, it is a fact that almost all computer programs are designed in English instructions. In Indonesia, the majority of the computer applications and Internet related programs are using English manuals. Therefore, both Internet usage and English language skills can be explored to support one another. In other words, the Internet can be used to learn English and English language skills may improve the Internet use.

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITIES**

Indonesian language is a medium of instruction in tertiary education. In terms of language as subjects of learning, most universities in Indonesia have either *Faculty of Language* or *Language Department*. The most popular foreign language chosen by students is English. The other foreign languages offered are Japanese, Chinese, German, French and Dutch. A few universities also offer Arabic and Javanese language.

In other faculties such as economics, medicine, technology, law, psychology, some foreign languages are offered as subjects but only English is considered as an essential one. For instance, in Faculty of Social and Political

Sciences where I teach communication, both Indonesian and English are included in the language component of the compulsory basic program.

The main purpose of learning English is to gain skills in reading textbooks and references that mostly are written in English although students should also have the ability to write papers and reports in Indonesian language. This method is referred to *English for General Academic Purposes* (EGAP) which includes various activities such as listening and note taking; academic writing; reference skills; seminars and discussions.

There is a difference in length of study for English and Indonesian language. Usually the duration of learning English as a compulsory subject is one year or two semesters but it is only one semester or a half year needed to complete Indonesian language subject. The curriculum designers might consider that learning English as a foreign language is more difficult and needs more time than learning Indonesian because almost every students use Indonesian language in their daily activities.

The priority of learning foreign language is oral proficiency but it varies among different tertiary institutions because the Ministry of Education only sets up a minimum curriculum as a base, then educators in universities may develop their own curriculum that would be fit with the students' needs and situation.

In terms of English teaching and learning, Mantiri (2004) argues that there are two major problems in teaching English in Indonesia which include *software* and *hardware* problems. Software problems refer to curriculum, policies and education system, while hardware problems include lack of facilities, low facilitators' skills and low students' achievements. I will explain more about these problems after the next part.

## **INTERNET IN INDONESIA**

Belawati (2003) in *ICT use in education in Indonesia* claims that Indonesia ranks number 21 within the top 25 countries of Internet users. Furthermore, the percentage of Internet users to total population is less than two percents although the growth of ICT users increased from around 2 million in 2000 to over 4 million in 2002.

For most Indonesian people, new media technologies such as personal computers and laptops are quite expensive. However, mobile phones are more affordable and popular particularly among youth. Regarding the Internet access, Belawati found that about 43 percent of users accessed Internet from Internet kiosks, 41% from offices, 12% from homes and 4% from schools or universities. In Indonesia, the cost of Internet access varies depending on the

type of connection lines (telephone, cable, fibre optic) and options (number of hours, application, etc.) but the most relatively affordable access is from Internet kiosks.

Related to the Internet and academic issue, in 2002 about 2,500 educational institutions were internet users which 80% were secondary schools and other 20% were higher education institutions. Unfortunately, it was a fact that the use of computers in educational institution as mostly for administrative purposes. Several school websites were used to promote their activities and communicate among students, teachers and parents. Only few international schools use the ICT application for teaching-learning activities.

## **PROBLEMS OF USING INTERNET FOR LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

Although the idea of using Internet in learning English is increasing among many countries, I believe that there are some difficulties in implementing this idea in Indonesian universities. Such problems are related to cultural background, students, educators, government, and communities.

### **1. Cultural background**

Culture plays an important part in the learning of a language. Zaharlick (1992) defines a *culture* as a total way of life shared by a group of people, socially learned, and meant that traditional knowledge is transmitted or communicated from one generation to the next. Furthermore, culture is flexible and fluid, changing through invention. There are several cultural aspects that might influence why the students are considered to have inadequate English skills and low Internet usage.

First, people in Indonesia tend to use **Indonesian language** as the main language to show deep appreciation of **national identity**. *Bahasa Indonesia* – based on Malay- is the national language used for the language of governments, mass media, daily communication and the medium of instruction in all educational institutions. Nababan (1982) identifies two functions of Indonesian language which are *the national language* and *the state language*. First, as *the national language*, it functions as (1) the symbol of the national pride; (2) the symbol of national identity; (3) a tool to enable the unification of the various ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds and languages into a unified Indonesian nation; and (4) a tool for inter-regional and inter-cultural communication. Second, as *the state language*, its has missions as (1) the official language of the state; (2) the medium of instruction in education; (3) the

communication tool for planning and implementing national development and governmental affairs; and (4) the tool of the development of culture, science and technology. Besides a national language, there are hundreds of local languages in Indonesia such as Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese and many more. Children usually learn to use a local language within their family, use Indonesian language at school and learn Arabic if they are Muslim. To explain this specific case, I refer to Stuart Hall's argument (1990) about *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, that Indonesian people are proud of using Indonesian language to show their *cultural identity*. According to another Hall's idea, language is also a *system of representation* in a culture which consists of signs and symbols. As members of the same culture, Indonesian people must use the same *cultural code* -which is a *national language*- to share ideas and feelings. Although there are many local languages, different ethnic groups in Indonesia insist to create one national identity by using one national language.

The second aspect of cultural background is that sometimes the **parents' level of education** does influence how they are aware of the importance of learning English and using Internet. As I mentioned before, it is relatively expensive to get access to the Internet. A few high-educated parents may facilitate computer and Internet access at home but the majority of them count on school to supply their children's needs. It is almost the same situation as learning English, where well-educated parents encourage their children to speak English at home, buy English books, or bring their children into private English courses but other parents totally rely on school to teach English to their children.

Another aspect of cultural background is the **media characteristics** in Indonesia. I believe that my societies tend to be *collectivists*, who like to do daily activities together. It would have the same character as the *traditional* media such television, radio, newspaper and magazine where people love to share and spend time together while using them. On the contrary, new media such as computer and mobile phone are considered as *individualists* where people tend to use them individually. This might be a reason why computers and Internet are less popular than televisions, radio programs, newspapers and magazines. This situation is similar to Hall's description (1997) that *an identity is marked by difference*. It means that Indonesian societies have certain way of life -in term of using mass media- that might be different from people from other cultures.

## **2. Educational Institutions**

Because of lack of financial support, many Indonesian universities are struggling to provide facilities such as language laboratories and teaching materials like books, audio visual equipments, computers, and internet access. It is common in Indonesia that a large number of students have to learn English in one classroom rather than in a language laboratory, use books rather than audio visual equipments, and rarely practice in real life.

In the past few years, there is a tendency to use English as a language of teaching instruction in some private universities in big cities. This fact was motivated by the competition between public and private universities and those institutions that offer English as a language of instruction may claim that they would be better than others in terms of improving English curriculum.

Since tertiary institutions have the flexibility to develop their own English curriculum, educators have to consider to create a programme which is innovative and involves students' self-motivation, commitment and support. It might not be easy to develop an English language curriculum -especially to combine Information Communication Technology (ICT) with English education- because the educators should have certain skills in computer technology related to the Internet and knowledge about different local cultures.

## **3. Students**

Most Indonesian universities students tend to have *low level of English skills* and *low awareness to learn English through Internet*. From my point of view, this is probably an impact of limited and relatively expensive access to the Internet. Another possible reason is that most of computer programs and Internet contents use English, so it might be easier to understand the information by watching television or listening to radio programs which use Indonesian language.

Another concern is the low motivation among students, especially those who live in rural areas. Mantiri (2004) mentions that some teachers in Indonesia might have a complaint that Indonesian students have *low motivation to learn English and tend to be passive in classroom activities*. I do not entirely agree with this argument because I think the culture of Indonesian people does influence the teaching-learning activities.

I refer to Ballard's argument (1996) that the cultural background gives influence on student's attitude, knowledge and study behaviour. For instance, Indonesian students are taught to give respect to older person -particularly teacher or lecturer- through sitting properly in the class, listening carefully what



the lecturer says and asking question after the lecturer finishes her/his explanation. The teaching-learning style in Indonesian universities is similar to what Ballard said as a '*reproductive approach*', in which the teacher becomes the *director of knowledge* who selects and transmits information, and requires students to memorize or reproduce the material. These evidences might be considered as a passive learning from different perspective, but I prefer to say that it is only a matter of different cultural background. Moreover, Stuart Hall (1997) notes that *a language is one of the 'media' where thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture*. It means that people may create meaning through verbal and nonverbal languages within social interaction. In this particular case, teachers may give different meanings to the students' attitudes and behaviours according to their own perspectives.

From another point of view, Coleman (1996) conducted a research to investigate the English learning process among Indonesian university students. He found that students had four ways of learning English such as studying in peer groups; visiting to the lecturer's house; finding opportunities to practice speaking English; or attending private language courses. I think this study is still relevant with recent situation that most students choose to learn English outside classroom.

#### **4. Academic Staff**

It is often suggested that academic staff, especially lecturers, have to be creative in designing teaching materials. Although there are limited resources and funding from the government and educational institutions, the educators are strongly encouraged to be innovative in promoting students' independent English learning. They can upgrade their skills through computer training, using technology in classroom and providing various teaching materials. I suppose it is not easy to put this ideal situation into practice because the fact shows that academic staff have lower salary than other professions and this may influence their teaching motivation. But I believe that there is a number of educators in Indonesia who have already had this teaching commitment.

## **5. Government**

Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education has not had strategic plan to implement the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education. Although some infrastructures have been developed in the past few years, they were only short terms and project-based activities (Belawati, 2003).

Until now, Indonesian government has financial difficulties to implement ICT program in educational institution. Universities have to search financial support from other sources to provide computers and Internet accesses, also develop appropriate content to improve English language skills. In terms of English language teaching, Indonesian government recommends teachers to use *Communicative Language Teaching* approach but it is still debatable whether it can be successful or not (Mantiri, 2004). Therefore, the educators have the most important role in designing English curriculum that would be fit to the students' need.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Cultural issues are crucial to the success of English language learning in Indonesia. Although many scholars agree to use new media –particularly the Internet- as a tool to learn English, it may not be easy to implement this idea in Indonesian universities.

Gee (2004) describes one principle which is relevant to learning as *active critical learning principle*. It means that all aspects of the learning environment are set up to encourage students to be active and critical. Furthermore, because of the complexity of the language and culture, lecturers are recommended to identify each student's learning style both inside and outside classroom. It is also necessary to understand different local cultures to create content that might support English education.

Regarding the Internet use, educators are suggested to be aware of using technologies to support students in studying English. Swenson et.al. (2006) advise that

“English educators, individually and collectively, have the right and the responsibility to influence the development, modification, and adoption of the newer technologies they will integrate into their teaching and their students' learning, and they have the right to reject others.”

Although there are many advantages in using Internet for English education, I recommend that teachers should concern of critical issues such as *intellectual property*, *plagiarism*, and *credibility of sources*. Recently, the Internet users may easily take other people's works and add them with new images, texts, and sounds then claim these works as his or her original creations. It is also simple to do plagiarism by finding references on-line, saving and making illegal copies without the authors' acknowledgement. Regarding the credibility of sources, students should be careful in searching a reliable reference because often the author's identity is unknown. All of these issues related to Tyner (1998) suggestion that it is important for teachers to inform their students about the ability to find, evaluate, and use information effectively.

## CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, Internet provides unlimited sources of information that can be explored to learn English. For instance, lecturers have opportunities to increase their knowledge; communicate with colleagues; get access to teaching materials and share resources. Students may also take benefits such as developing research skills, having interactive learning, communicating with other students and getting better understanding of global issues. Furthermore, there are two advantages of using Internet for English language learners: (1) have a direct contact with native speakers; and (2) obtain various English teaching/learning materials.

On one hand, *webpages* and *websites* offer many advantages in combining texts, images, animations, videos, voices, music and sound effects; on the other hand, the Internet may have significant social and cultural effects. It is a fact that the English language skills and the computer literacy are the two most common criteria required to enter the multinational work place. Therefore, university students should be prepared to face these new challenges. Although there are many difficulties in using Internet to support learning English in Indonesian universities, I believe this idea can be implemented in the near future.



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