

Promoting Learners' Autonomy by Using Facebook to Enhance Students' Writing Skills

Syazliyati Ibrahim, Sharina Saad, Norlizawati Md Tahir and Phaveena Primsuwan

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ABSTRACT

Language learning in the 21st century develops in tandem with technology. The growth of social media as the platform for communication is a positive element that can influence students' learning especially in languages. One clear advantage of having such media is that students can be autonomous in their learning because they are already familiar with the platform and they use these sites in their daily lives. VELLP or Virtual English Language Learning Programme is one such agenda that has managed to take advantage of the popular usage of social media amongst students today. This programme is created to cater to thirty students of SMK Bakar Arang, Sungai Petani who have the potential to become better English language users. All thirty students are invited to join the online learning community in Facebook, moderated by four English language lecturers. Diverse topics and interesting issues were raised in the online forum, enabling the students to communicate with one another using correct language. A pretest and a posttest were given; and data from the tests were tabulated to show the effectiveness of the programme. All in all, VELLP has managed to prove that an online chatroom or an online community is able to facilitate second language learners to practice their writing skills in the target language in a fun and relaxed manner.

Keywords: Social media; Facebook; Autonomous learning; Writing skills

Norlizawati Md Tahir (✉): Syazliyati Ibrahim . Sharina Saad . Phaveena Primsuwan
Academy of Language Studies,
Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah, MALAYSIA
E-mail: lizawati@kedah.uitm.edu.my

Syazliyati Ibrahim
E-mail: syazliyati@kedah.uitm.edu.my

Sharina Saad
E-mail: sharina854@kedah.uitm.edu.my

Phaveena Primsuwan
E-mail: phaveena@kedah.uitm.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

Technology can never be separated with language learning in the 21st century. The proliferation of social media as a part of students' lives is a positive element which can promote language learning. Social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook are part and parcel of our lives today. Students are avid users of these sites and they always update the feeds or statuses in these sites to share their daily activities, feelings or expectations. In this digital era, students are known to be vigorously involved in a wide range of technology-facilitated literacy activities in their out-of-school practices like text-messaging, emailing, playing online games, and chatting through social network sites (Zheng & Warschauer, 2017).

Facebook has evolved during the fast technological and societal changes over the past decade to become the world's largest social-networking site (SNS) (Dizon, 2016). Lenhart et al (2012) (in Salameh, 2017) claimed that Facebook is found to be the most popular social network used by students. This is because it allows students to share photographs and personal information and at the same time enable them to join groups of similar interests. For the past few years, social media platforms such as Facebook, have come to be an important feature in students' personal lives and have become tools of prime importance in maintaining interpersonal relationships, exchanging information as well as providing entertainment value (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee 2011; Madgeet al. 2009; Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 2009, as cited in Camus et. al, 2016). Eren (2012) led a study on a group of undergraduate students who were instructed to use Facebook in their course and the findings were that students had a very positive attitude towards the use of Facebook activity as a supplement to language classroom (cited in Salameh, 2017)

One competitive edge that using social media allows in teaching and learning is that it promotes learners' autonomy. Camus et. al (2016) posited that Facebook is more effective as a learning platform when it is driven by the students themselves and is professed as a meaningful activity.

Since online discussions happen asynchronously, students have ample time to develop their responses before participating and this increases student comfort with classmates, which can lead to the development of a keen sense of community (Chapman, Romondt, & Smile 2005, as cited in Camus, 2016). Facebook can be a beneficial supplementary platform to allow interaction because it can encourage peer dialogue and classroom community (Camus, 2016). This in return will empower students in their learning and teach them to be independent.

Writing is a skill that is commonly problematic amongst second language learners. Students generally find writing as a barrier in learning because from students' viewpoints, there is little value of writing to developing a written product and receiving a grade from the teacher. This decontextualization and artificiality in classroom writing give them no real sense of purpose or perspective of a target audience. Therefore, using Facebook as a tool to promote writing provides the students with context and meaning to complete their tasks. Numerous previous studies have proven that Facebook can be useful as a tool to improve writing skills in the classrooms. Wichadee (2013) concurred that Facebook is advantageous

for peer feedback in developing writing skills whereas Shukor and Noordin (2014) posited that Facebook was effective in improving collaborative writing projects amongst students. Bani-Hani, Al-Sobh, and Abu-Melhim (2014) also expounded that Facebook was effective in teaching EFL writing by looking the students' perceptions. Suthiwartnarueput and Wasanasomsithi (2014) further concurred that both writing skills and grammar understanding are improved amongst the freshmen studied at a university. Akbari, Pilot and Simons (2015) also found that Facebook group learning amongst their Iranian students allowed them to feel more autonomous, competent and related.

Problem Statement

Many available studies on Facebook (Yunus et al., 2011, 2012, Kabilan et al. 2010, Shukor & Noordin, 2014) as a tool in learning in Malaysia used university students as their samples. This could be due to the reasons that students at the tertiary level are more exposed to social media, familiar and have access to phones or computers and more independent in their approaches to learning. In light of this, this particular paper is focused on studying the secondary school students use of Facebook as a supplementary tool to promote learners' autonomy and writing skills.

Significance of Study

This study is important since it attempts to contribute to the body of knowledge on online leaning which can be beneficial for ESL students. It is particularly significant since studies on use of online chatroom in social media amongst secondary school students are scarce.

Research Questions

1. Does online chatroom on Facebook improve writing skills?
2. Does online chatroom on Facebook promote learners' autonomy?

Objectives

1. To investigate whether online chatroom on Facebook improve students' writing skills.
2. To examine whether online chatroom on Facebook promote learners' autonomy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Facebook in the ESL Classroom

Facebook is an example of web 2.0 which is the largest Multilanguage site on the Net (Grosbeck, 2011). Facebook enables the internet users to communicate and share ideas across different continents, languages, and culture. Since Facebook enables users to communicate using different languages, both orally and written, such opportunity should be seized by the ESL teachers to use this social networking site in the language classroom. (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin,, 2010).

Due to the limited exposure to the target language, ESL learners often have problems in the learning of English in ordinary English classes. (Cziko, 2005). To make matters worse, often large class size hampers teachers' efforts to pay attention to individual students especially in writing classrooms. ESL learners are often dependent on the teachers to teach them everything. As they have very minimal exposure to the target language, some teachers

often resort to use their native language to deliver course materials for various reasons. With Facebook, the teachers can for instance, assign students to write a short paragraph about their experiences in the target language and other students are encouraged to read and add comments. The teacher may also have students join groups associated with English language teaching and learning and participate in the discussion or share relevant information. By providing these students with exposure to English as much as possible, they will be able to receive critical comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) and, at the same time, experiment with their comprehensible output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Hence, with the effective use of Facebook, the problem of lack of exposure to English among students can be addressed.

Secondly, Facebook offers great opportunities for the students to develop their writing skills (Alias, Siraj, Azman, Daud, & Hussin, 2013). Students need to be explained about the tasks clearly and especially on how they should go about completing their writing tasks. In a Facebook chat, teachers can guide the students through active and dynamic interaction between teacher and students and this will help the students to overcome their anxiety to use the target language in the classrooms.

Additionally, the fact that Facebook enables users to write lengthy statuses will provide opportunity for the high flyers to practice writing and encourage their peers to read and add comments. Facebook activities become even more interesting as some of these learners are passive learners in the ESL classroom but seem to be actively involved and are comfortable in using English on Facebook. This observation appears to suggest that Facebook offers a conducive and friendly learning environment for the learners to practise their English language skills. Furthermore, Facebook has successfully won the heart of many people, young and adults. Communication in Facebook groups is mostly done in writing, therefore this study would like to find out how this popular medium develops writing skills and students' autonomy in learning writing.

Learner Autonomy

In recent years, interest in students' autonomy has grown considerably in the field of language education (e.g., Benson, 2007). Furthermore, along with the development of internet and its usage, there are also many studies that investigated how the internet usage can be adopted to facilitate the learning process.

The theory and practice of autonomy in language learning was initiated from Knowel's research of self-directed learning (1975). In the 1970s and 1980s the focuses on adult self-directed learning has started to become more popular. Then a scholar, Holec introduced the term autonomy in 1981. He defined autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (cited in Benson, 2007).

The second wave of the interest in learner autonomy in language learning and teaching has suggested the re-conceptualizing of autonomy if it was to be used to the classroom context. Allwright (1988: 35, cited in Benson 2007) suggested this because he defined autonomy as long-life learning which was not adequate to be captured by the classroom environment. This idea was then supported by the development of computer and internet usage for the academic and educational purposes.

In recent years, the third wave of autonomy has shown a growing interest leading to

new and often complex understandings of the role of autonomy in language teaching and learning. According to Benson (2007), language skills can best be developed if the learner develops an awareness of his or her own learning, of the strategies and styles that are available. Strategic competence means being able to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate one's learning, and make use of all available opportunities both in and outside the classroom. In the present study, the students are provided with a virtual environment, the opportunities which enable them to interact with their facilitators and other learners about their writing activities on Facebook.

In tandem with Dam (1995, cited in Nordlund, n.d.) it is stressed that in the social dimension learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person. Therefore, in the writing activities, every participant was encouraged to respond to each other's writing, whether to appreciate it or to comment on it. An important part of language-learning awareness is the admission that a lot of learning goes on the outside the classroom.

Autonomous Learning of Writing

Writing is one of the most complex activities that people can accomplish. It is undeniable that the toughest skill in English learning is writing which requires a learner's competency to receive the information, process it, and at least, produce it. Often teachers find it hard to achieve the objective as they find the two hours session in writing classroom is insufficient because writing involves long processes, which require more time, more effort, as well as more guidance. Indeed, learners need to learn more outside the classroom to be a good writer, especially a writer who writes in his or her second language. It is undeniably that the demand of autonomous learning in writing is such a crucial issue to be focused on. Therefore, in this study the researchers would like to explore how autonomous learning of writing could be developed by using a Facebook group which is able to provide more space for learning outside the classroom.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical roots underpinning the present research stem from the social-constructivist pedagogy. Constructivism, particularly in its "social" forms, gives emphasis on active involvement of the 30 secondary school students' participation in writing their activities in a Facebook group. When the learners are actively writing in their group, they are being interactive and practising active learning with their teachers and peers in creating (constructing) knowledge. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory reinforces the importance of social interaction in helping learners to achieve cognitive learning. He posited that social interaction could leverage learners' skills to a level that is hardly attained by individual learning as it provides tremendous opportunity for learners to verbalize their own learning, reinforces their own understanding, and allows them to access varied resources provided by others. Researchers can seamlessly relocate this theory in the realm of language learning and teaching.

According to Piaget (1969), social knowledge can be learned through actions or interactions and collaboration with people. Similarly, Vygotsky's theory (1978) emphasizes the social essence of knowledge construction. According to his theory, social interactions are

an essential part of human cognitive development. A key principle of social constructivism is the pedagogical emphasis on the role of active participation and collaboration among the learners and teachers.

In an online-supported collaborative learning, the mutual relations among learners are assisted by technology which combines learning activities with an online learning environment. According to researchers' estimations, the technological tools that support collaborative learning have great potential for significant learning as they also enable peer interaction, self-directed learning, reaching out to experts and finally, generating new knowledge. The emphasis in Facebook on communication, interaction and social bonding can be embedded within the social-constructivist learning process. Such a process allows for new perspectives of educational behaviour that were previously not possible. Now with the emergence of Facebook groups, where participation does not require "friendship" or personal exposure among its members, the opportunity for a learning community is created, whereby teachers and students can learn together without sharing their personal lives. In VELLP, the facilitators who are involved in this project are lecturers teaching in a local university whereas the participants are students in a secondary school in Kuala Muda District. Regardless of the little personal knowledge of the students and the teachers, learning took place tremendously in the online activities via Facebook.

Furthermore, Woo & Reeves (2007) stated that meaningful interactions in learning environments are designed to enhance meaning, sharing various perspectives and experiences in communities of practice. In addition, Shih (2011) explained that Vygotsky (1978) focused on the effects of social interaction, language and culture on learning. In his study, Shih's (2011) results were consistent with the principle of the social constructivist theory that meaningful interactions in a learning environment is strengthened by sharing perspectives, ideas, and experiences in online communities of practice. In an online learning environment designed based on the social constructivist learning theory, meaningful interaction should include responding to peers, negotiating and arguing with peers, adding ideas, and offering alternative perspectives regarding real life tasks. Humans are social beings by nature, thus learning a language is tied to social interactions. Woo & Reeves (2007) stated, "Learning is viewed primarily as a social product yielded by the processes of conversation, discussion and negotiation" (p. 18).

Nowadays, many educators have come to see the value of implementing social constructivism in their classes as a more effective educational environment, especially for language learners. Learning is an interactive process of participating in various social and cultural practices where collaboration occurs.

Facebook Group such as VELLP portrays a community of practice, where learners can interact with their peers and work collaboratively to produce a quality work of their own, which is an important component of language learning in social constructivist theory. In addition, collaborative interaction promotes a non-threatening learning environment, where a learner's anxiety toward language learning is reduced. Facebook writing activities will no doubt strongly benefit language learners in their learning process. The social constructivism theory is significant to this study because of the interaction between the writers and readers in the community; in VELLP, the platform for writers to be the creator of text is the virtual community.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, the convenience sampling was chosen in collecting the data. The target group was 30 form four Pure Science Stream students (4ST1 and 4ST2) from Sekolah Menengah Bakar Arang, Sungai Petani, Kedah. The group was a mixture of male and female students with 12 male students and 18 female students.

The research instrument included a pre- test and a post -test while interview is used as a tool to collect the respondents' feedback towards the use of Virtual English Language Learning programme (VELLP) in helping them to improve their writing skills. Both the pre-test and post-test were a written test where the students were instructed to write a complete essay based on the same topic to analyse the differences and improvement in terms of the students' language ability, sentence structure, grammar and vocabulary. In the pre-test, the students were given 1 hour to complete an essay. The pre-test was conducted in the classroom. After that, the students were given 1 month to participate in VELLP through Facebook. They created posts on a variety of topics which were related to their school life. At the same time, other members of the group were prompted by the lecturer cum facilitators to respond to their friends' posts. After one month, a post-test was conducted and the students were required to write another essay to see if there was an improvement in their writing. The post-test was also conducted in a classroom. Both the pre-test and post-test essays were marked using the standard marking scheme for SPM Paper 1. This is because their test papers at school are marked based on the SPM marking criteria. The marking was based on the marking scheme for continuous writing where it is based on mark range and grade as follow:

Mark range	Grade
44-50	A
38-43	B
32-37	C
26-31	D
20-25	E
14-19	U[i]
8-13	U[ii]
0-7	U[iii]

For the interview session, 10 students were randomly selected from the 30 participants involved in this study. Each one of them was asked 5 questions related to the outcome and experiences of the students participating in VELLP programme. The outcome and experiences asked in the interview were related to their writing skills and learner autonomy. All their responses were recorded for a qualitative analysis. The recorded videos then were transcribed for further analysis.

RESULTS

Pre-test and Post-test results

Based on Table 1 above, majority of the students showed an improvement in their results

with an increase of a minimum of 1 mark to a maximum of 4 marks.

Table 1
 Pre-test and Post-test results

	Pre-test (Marks & grades)	Post-test (Marks & grades)	Increase/Decrease
Essay 1	38 (B)	40 (B)	2
Essay 2	33 (C)	36 (C)	3
Essay 3	32 (C)	36 (C)	4
Essay 4	44 (A)	45 (A)	1
Essay 5	31 (D)	33 (C)	2
Essay 6	34 (B)	32 (C)	-2
Essay 7	32 (C)	34 (C)	2
Essay 8	39 (B)	43 (B)	4
Essay 9	38 (B)	40 (B)	2
Essay 10	43 (B)	47 (A)	4
Essay 11	34 (C)	36 (C)	2
Essay 12	40 (B)	41 (B)	1
Essay 13	37 (C)	39 (B)	2
Essay 14	33 (C)	32 (C)	-1
Essay 15	40 (B)	38 (B)	-2
Essay 16	39 (B)	40 (B)	2
Essay 17	37 (C)	39 (B)	2
Essay 18	33 (C)	30 (D)	-3
Essay 19	35 (C)	38 (C)	3
Essay 20	44 (A)	46 (A)	2

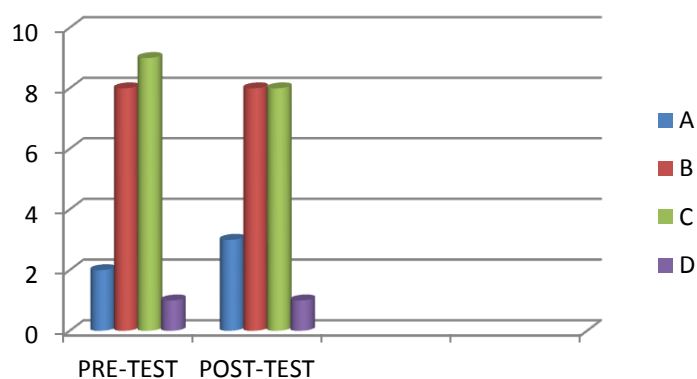


Fig 1 Results based on grades

Based on Figure 1 above, there was an increase in the number of students who achieved an A, from 2 in pre-test, to 3 in the post-test. The number of students of achieved a B and a D remained the same with 8 and 1 respectively. However, the number of students who scored a C decreased from 9 students to 8 students.

Interview Results

Q1: Do you think VELLP has helped you improve your writing?

Based on the interview analysis, it was found that all the respondents agreed that VELLP programme has helped them to improve their writing in English. Some of the responses given were "...yes because I can write a better essay when joining this programme...", "Yes, I think it's really improve a lot because before this I'm just only good in Malay essays...", "Yes improve a lot I think...yes...because before this my English is I'm a bit worst...". Most of the respondents stated that they could see improvement in terms of grammar part and their vocabulary. One of the respondents stated "...In grammar-wise I would say yes because we normally post a lot of grammar notes in VELLP...and grammar is one of the hardest sub-topic in English". They believed that they could write better and VELLP had managed to motivate them to write. They also felt more excited as the programme used Facebook as a platform which was more interactive and they were familiar with the use of Facebook in their daily life. One respondent shared "...but when I'm at VELLP I feel excited then I write too much..."

Q2: What are other benefits you gained from joining VELLP?

The respondents mostly mentioned that other than improving their writing, VELLP also created a better opportunity for them to get closer with their schoolmates and they found it easier to share their activities, experiences and feelings through the Facebook posts. Most of them would responded "...become more close to another friends from other class...", "...we can make our relationship more closer and we can know better about our friends", "...but after entering this programme I can talk to many friends, I get some new friends...", "...I can interact with people I don't really know much...". They also found that their confidence level and motivation had increased in using English as they were not shy, stressed or nervous to write and post in VELLP compared to when they have to speak English face-to-face with their friends. They shared "...I feel more confident...like before this I'm not that good in English...", "...because we are chatting, not face to face so we can express ourselves freely...", "I can communicating with others fluently...". The respondents also stated that they gained knowledge from all the posts their friends shared in VELLP. One respondent mentioned "I can gain more knowledge from Facebook because from see my friend's posting about the vocabulary and so on..."

Q3: What do you think about improving English using Facebook?

From the interview, it was found that the respondents were comfortable and more motivated to use English in Facebook. Most of them mentioned about the function of "Auto-correct" that had mainly helped them in identifying their errors in spelling and grammar. The respondents stated "It's a good method I think because it has auto-correct...", "I would say it's easier to use Facebook than writing because auto-correct helps a lot, and you'll know when you are wrong, it will tell you when you are wrong...so I feel a bit more confident using Facebook because then I know I didn't make a fool of myself and I'm writing the right thing". All the respondents believed that it was easier to use Facebook and that contributed to the confidence they gained in using English.

Q4: How do you feel about writing your experiences on Facebook?

Some of the respondents admitted that they were a bit shy to write and post on Facebook at

first, but gradually they were more confident and could write better. The main reason was because they received positive feedback and comments from their friends. The respondents stated "...when I see my friends post and when I post, my friends comment to me if I got mistake", "...whatever I write in there...hmm...my friend and teacher can help me". They corrected each other's mistakes and learn together through Facebook. Other respondents felt positive and were excited to share their writing on Facebook and believed it has helped them to improve their English writing proficiency. One respondent mentioned "...I can share idea with them and make me a bit brave to write in English".

Q5: Do you think Facebook has helped you to be independent as a learner?

The respondents agreed that Facebook offers them the opportunity to be independent and be more responsible towards their own learning. They shared that they have their own space, time and freedom to write on any topics they are interested in (posts in VELLP). They have control over what they could share and post and they could freely express their opinion and feelings towards each other's postings. The most important aspect is they are aware that there are improvements in their learning. Some of the responses were "I can see this in my exam...my mid-year exam...yeah it improves a lot...in writing...", "It was proven when I have a test...every test, I can write better..."

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings from both the written tests and the interview session, it generally shows positive improvement and responses from the participants. VELLP programme using Facebook as the platform has tremendously aided these students in improving their English, particularly in writing skill as well as improve their confidence level in English communication. In terms of writing skill, VELLP is proven to be effective and beneficial to improve students' writing aspects particularly in grammar and vocabulary enhancement. Through VELLP, they will get themselves familiar in writing willingly, thus increase their motivation and confidence level in using the language. In the study by Shih (2011) also found that the use of Facebook in learning English writing can significantly enhance students' interest and motivation. The more posts and writing they share on Facebook, the more comfortable and confident they become. According to Reid (2011), students who share their thoughts and ideas in closed-group Facebook pages feel safe enough and experience an interesting shift in modes of learning. However, the most essential result of this study is that the students were aware of their improvement in learning and they were highly positive about having the chance to control and be responsible of their own learning, thus directing them to be an active independent learner.

Thus, VELLP has successfully helped the students to improve both their English writing and trained them to be more autonomous in learning. They learnt to be in control and more responsible towards their own learning in a less threatening environment, contributing cooperatively amongst the members in the Facebook group. In a social networking-based learning like Facebook, it encourages an autonomous learning within a social environment for students that also put control for studying into the students' hands (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011). Besides, the use of Facebook as a platform in the programme received positive feedback from the students as it is more interactive and less intimidating for them. As the students were very familiar with Facebook, they could communicate and actively participate with the other members of the group although some initially feel shy to post their writing.

Gradually, these students gained confidence and felt more comfortable to post as they could see the other friends giving support to each other and provided constructive responses towards each other's postings. In this, we could see that the students have also participated in a constructivist learning environment where they became actively involved in the process of gaining knowledge and learning. A study by Ractham and Firpo (2012) also found that the use of Facebook as a medium for a learning environment has encouraged social interactions among the users and fostered constructivist learning. This supports similar finding in this study where the use of VELLP in Facebook has also offered the students the experience of learning outside classroom setting while at the same time achieving social learning in a constructivist and collaborative learning environment.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This study was a small-scale study involving students who were almost homogeneous in their language ability. More insights can be discovered if students with more heterogeneous background in language proficiency were involved. Other than that, this project was carried out without having a controlled group. More reliable results can be obtained if a controlled group was formed to provide a comparison to the experimental group. Further research can also be conducted using other social media as the platform such as Twitter, Instagram or Telegram. We had also only appointed one examiner to mark the scripts. For further research, it will be better to use two examiners per script to moderate the results.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, VELLP has benefited the students in diverse ways. They did not only improve their English language writing skills; they had also managed to be more autonomous in their learning. Both these aspects have been proven via the test results and the interview data. In the same vein, students have also gained higher self-confidence in expressing themselves through writing. They had also gained more knowledge and had learnt to be supportive in a collaborative and constructivist learning environment. As an enrichment project that provides a rather low anxiety level in English language learning, online chatroom like VELLP is a highly plausible choice for ESL learners.

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About the Authors

Syazliyati Ibrahim, Sharina Saad, Norlizawati Md Tahir and Phaveena Primsuwan are attached to the Academy of Language Studies at Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah, Malaysia.