IMPROVING UNDERGRADUATES' CRITIQUE VIA COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT
Our current university students, labeled as *Generation Y* or Millennials, are different from previous generations due to wide exposure to media. Being technologically savvy, they are accustomed to Internet for information and social media for socializing. In line with this current trend, teaching through computer mediated communication (CMC) is highly recommended at higher institutions as students learn by doing, relating the discussion to real world issues, and the use of current social media. In this study, blog was employed in assessing students' critiques in an Academic Communication II course at the Centre for General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using blog as CMC tool in encouraging students to read, analyze and information in argumentative texts critically. It also attempts to identify the challenges faced by students in using blog in completing the assigned critique task. An online survey was administered to gather feedback on the use of blog in the Critique evaluation of the course. The class instructor's reflective notes were also analyzed. The findings revealed that blog has helped the participants namely in generating ideas, motivating participation and improving their critique. However, it was also discovered that participants encountered some challenges especially technical glitches.

Keywords: Generation Y, Writing, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), Blog, Critique.

INTRODUCTION
Technology has advanced with the use of the Internet in homes and classrooms and it has revolutionised the way information is accessed and shared. However, teaching and learning at some local higher institutions has not reformed accordingly. In view of this, local educators also face challenges in keeping up with the Generation Y, who are technologically savvy primarily for interaction purposes (Ibrahim & Mehmet, 2014). They advocate that CMC in blended learning promotes an environment whereby the users have ample opportunity to provide simultaneous feedback which are effective to enhance language learning. It is timely to use computer mediated communication (CMC) in teaching and learning at higher institutions. CMC makes it possible for individuals to gain more knowledge on the updated information in various fields. In addition, CMC allows wider opportunities for students to practice their writing skills. This is supported by Li and Tongshun (2006) who cite that CMC can bring positive effects in building up students writing competency. Their writing competency is honed through the use of CMC such as text messaging, emailing, chatting, and blogging in students' daily routines.

Lin and Fang (2010) conducted a study on CMC integration in EFL classrooms. Their findings highlight the effects of CMC on language learners' speaking and writing skills. Teachers are able to identify students' problems when comprehending their writing. Therefore, teachers could assist students in correcting their mistakes, giving comments and providing additional information. Cunningham (2011) further emphasizes that writing quality of students can be improved by using CMC because students tend to be more motivated to write for authentic reasons. Ferrazzi (2012) agrees that a significant amount of learning has transpired in these interactions. Without these social opportunities, virtual teams will struggle to create relationships. Simon (2006) notes that CMC has permeated our professional and personal lives.

This study aims to find out the effectiveness of using CMC as a tool in encouraging students to read and analyze information critically in argumentative texts, which is one of the evaluations in Academic Communication II course at the Centre of General Studies in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This course was designed to equip students with higher level of academic skills to function effectively in academic settings as it assists students in employing critical thinking and communication skills through exposure to current and global issues. In the Critique evaluation, the students were expected to apply the critical reading skills when exploring information in the argumentative texts on current issues. They critically analyze them and discuss their views in their small groups via blog. They responded each others' postings to encourage interaction and discussion. Individually, they had to produce a written critique of 650 to 700 words and sent to the class instructor via email or Facebook.

Research Objectives:
1. To investigate the effectiveness of using blog as a CMC tool in improving students' critique of argumentative texts.
2. To identify the challenges faced by students in using blog while carrying out the critique evaluation.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Theoretical Background
Our interest in developing online forum or blog for these students was sparked by constructivist theory. Constructivist theory can be divided into two; individual learning process (cognitive constructivist theory) and collaborative learning process (socio constructivist theory). Cognitive constructivist theory focuses on the individual learning process (David et al., 1999). When the students become self-directed learners, they will put much effort to navigate, develop and assess their own learning. In our study, students engage themselves in the given task which is to carry out a discussion via blog. Each idea and stance needs to be substantiated with some concrete facts or notions. Thus, they have to read extensively and intensively before they could write a good critique on an argumentative article.

Socio constructivist theory focuses on collaborative learning with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Initially, the students are not ready to become total self-directed students. In the process of becoming self-directed learners, they need to be equipped with the necessary skills (Knowles, 1998). In this study, they need to be equipped with some relevant knowledge particularly on how to critique argumentative texts effectively and how to evaluate information with guidance and assistance from facilitator and peers. The guidance is in the form of providing resources, making corrections and comments plus mentoring. The assistance of peers through collaborative learning could result in the students acquiring new skills. These resulted in the students being more critical and analytical from different perspectives on the issues discussed. Apparently, this process of peer learning which prompts the students to take successive steps in constructing new knowledge is known as scaffolding (Cole et al., 1978; Jordan et al., 2008).

Scaffolding differs from the broader use of guidance in two ways. First, guidance is only provided when the students are unable to proceed. Gradually, the guidance is withdrawn or faded when the students have already developed their competence or understanding and can act independently (Jordan et al., 2008). However, scaffolding is needed again if there are changes in the task or context. The domain in which learning is the most productive is called as Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this domain, the students are not yet ready to be independent learners. They still need guidance and direction from their teacher or capable peers. Scaffolding can also be provided by the students through self-talk (Jordan et al., 2008). After they have discussed in depth via blog, they are expected to grasp the skills to write effective critique. Later, when the students are perceived to be able to work independently, they are then instructed to find another argumentative article and write individual critique.

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) via Blog
According to Patrikis (1995) blog is a medium of free interaction between communicators. Individuals could be grouped together and carry out discussion via blog for various reasons. Moran and Hawisher (1998) mentioned that blog is an amalgam of written and spoken language. In order to replace or support face-to-face interactions, blog is always considered and adopted as an alternative platform for interactions especially if the students are physically isolated from each other (Inoue, 2007; Supyan, 2008). Blog could also be an academic platform which attempts to promote interaction beyond the classroom. It is necessary for the students to enhance their knowledge and improve their critical thinking skills so as to complete their assignments and to excel in their assessments (Nuttal, 2005).

Additionally, some researchers (Ramesh & Sanjaya, 2007; Norwati & Zaini, 2007; Inoue, 2007; Supyan, 2008) reiterate that blog enables the students to have patrons to brainstorm, expand and complementing ideas, discuss

various issues relevant to the course, develop team planning, have question and answer sessions and personal interactions. In the online discussion, the students act as teachers and motivators to each other (Inoue, 2007). Inoue (2007) also emphasized that blog is able to promote active participation among students. In this study, blog is utilized to support the discussion in class meetings. Active participation is possible if students correspond with each other regularly as if they are in an actual classroom. Active and fruitful discussion is pivotal to enhance teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the lack of nonverbal cues when discussing in blog could result in miscommunication among communicators (Walther, 1993). However, the absence of these nonverbal cues could promote more equal authority, status and turn-taking (Rice & Love, 1987). In a study conducted by Scharlott and Christ (1994), CMC via blog was found more useful to its communicators since it helps them to overcome the relationship barriers which stem from sex role, shyness and appearance. In this respect, the students would feel less inhibited to express their ideas and viewpoints. It is safe to conclude that the absence of physical visibility could also provide a lot of benefits to the target users.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
This study has employed qualitative research methods. Within the scope of the research, an online survey (open ended questions) and reflective notes were utilized.

Data Collection Tools
This study has used the online survey in Google Doc which was administered to 13 students after they had completed the Critique evaluation. There were eight questions posted online and students answered individually at the students' own pace. This is a participatory action research whereby the class instructor acts as a researcher in the study. Her reflective notes were also used as one of the research tools.

Participants
First year students registered in the Faculty of Medicine were required to enroll in two English courses namely Academic Communication and Workplace Communication. These students who obtained Band 5 or 6 in their Malaysia University English Test (MUET) had to enroll in Academic Communication II. MUET is a test of English language proficiency, largely for local university admission. The Band 5 and 6 scorers are considered as very good users of English. The subjects in this study consisted of 13 Medical Faculty students who registered for Academic Communication 2 course and they obtained MUET Band 5.

The Critique Procedure
In Week 2, the students in Academic Communication II course was given an argumentative text in the class and instructed to discuss in groups of 4 - 5. Learning input on critique and aspects for critique were discussed in class in relation to the text given earlier. Sample critiques were also discussed in detail in preparing the students with the task. A group blog was created and the participants had to select a suitable argumentative text to be posted in the blog.

Students wrote an individual critique which was read and shared with the group. Each student was asked to post at least two postings. This was followed by comments from group members based on the critique posted. The respondents were encouraged to respond to the comments made by others. In order to encourage the students to write substantial entries and interact frequently, 10 percent of the total 30 percent (Critique) was allocated for the postings as well as the number of interactions. Allocating marks and dividing the students into small groups were adopted as suggested by Amelia and Mohamed Amin (2007). These are important to avoid any students from becoming lurkers.

The class instructor acted as a monitor, motivator, and troubleshooter to ensure all the process was able to run smoothly. Most of the instructor's responses were given during face-to-face tutorials. The class instructor as well as the students tried to solve some of their problems together. Some of the problems are the students' unfamiliarity with the technical aspects as well as how to carry out the discussion effectively. In the introductory lesson, all students were instructed to bring their laptop and broadband device into the class. During the lesson, they carried out small group discussions via face-to-face and at the same time exchanged personal entries and comments in the blog. These steps were taken in the effort to familiarize the students with the blog as well technical knowledge since most of these students had minimal experience in using blog for academic purposes.

The online discussion acts as a scaffolding activity in preparing the students for the individual critique. In small groups, the students selected an argumentative article which was given to the class instructor for her approval

with regard to the length, topic and content. After 2 weeks of online discussion, individually, the students had to write a longer critique based on the selected argumentative article.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Primarily, this study has shown that CMC is able to bring a lot of benefits to the targeted students but there are also difficulties in its usage. The results of this study are presented and discussed according to the following aspects which are based on the open-ended questions in the online survey and the instructor's reflective notes.

1. Generating ideas for Critique
2. Motivating the students to participate in critique
3. Improving their critique skills

1. Generating ideas for Critique
Participants reported that one of the most prominent benefits of using CMC is its suitability as a platform for generating ideas. Being given ample time, these students were able to read and comprehend the critique and comments of their classmates. They were able generate, expand and complement their scope of ideas. They were able to identify more criteria and study each criterion in a more in depth manner. In other words, they could widen their perspective and thinking horizon. As the students could submit more than one posting, they could improvise their following postings based on their reading of others' postings. They could read the argumentative article for a few times until they reached a certain level of confidence to write their own critique.

These statements are reflected in the following which episodes are derived from the responses to the given open-ended questions,

> *Yes. The blog was effective in generating ideas for the critique because the group students were able to look through the critique of their friends and the comments that they received for each of their critique which* **expands their scope of idea for the critique.** *Immediate commenting on the critiques through the blog also allows the group students to* **compare their comments with the others** *and allows them to* **have more flows of ideas to further comment or further critique** *an article.*

> *We could* **share our ideas and also improvise on another's idea** *to create a more better one through discussion.*

The diverse ideas displayed in the discussion are due to the difference of their personal background which is rooted from different gender, race, family, and culture (*Each of us provided different point of views that was probably based on each person's background. Thus, the* **variety of background was able to generate new ideas and new scopes**). These made their discussion more colorful, interesting and beneficial as reflected by another participant,

> *There are ideas generated from different people with different views and perspectives on the topic discussed. Their postings* **triggered me to think from different perspective."**

These findings are parallel to Dawson's (2006) statement that CMC promotes development of a learning community consisting of diverse cultural and personal background. The learning community which is the blog discussion enables students to add and relate to their existing knowledge in order to generate new ideas. Additionally, it is important to note that the interaction beyond the classroom is necessary for them to enhance their knowledge and improve their critical skills (Nuttal, 2005).

2. Improving their critique skills
In the blog discussion, students not only had to write critiques based on the argumentative article, but also provide comments towards each others' postings. They always took into account their peers and the instructor's comments in revising their written piece. They were able to conduct peer correction and provide sound suggestions to improve each other's work. In doing so, they referred to both printed and online dictionaries. Additionally, they persistently compared their work with others which resulted in them to widen their vision and perspective as well (*Others' postings and comments* **trigger me to think for different perspective.**).

They knew that each stance or idea they put forth needs to be substantiated with concrete train of thought and evidences in order to convince others. In order for them to write and submit their postings, they had to do extensive reading because they need to substantiate their viewpoints not only from their own personal experience but also with facts taken from credible sources. They applied the knowledge they learnt during the class on how

to evaluate sources namely differentiating facts and opinions; evaluating source credibility; identifying author's biasness and et cetera. Hence, this repeated process enabled them to hone their writing and critical skills as claimed by three participants,

> The blog helps because we not only have to submit a minimum of two posts of our own critique on the article, but we also need to give a minimum of two comments on other students' posts. Since we have to write more than one critique, the **repeating process improves students' critique writing. Practice makes perfect :)**

> From the comments I received from the instructor and friends. **Their comments that highlighted my weaknesses and suggestion to write it in the proper way help me a lot.**

> I can learn from my other friends by reading their critiques posted on the blog. I also receive comments and suggestions from my friends in the blog, which allow me to **improve my way of writing** and most importantly, **expand my vision.**

Evidently, blog is an effective platform for students to improve their critique writing by working collaboratively.

The fear of being judged and ridiculed by their fellow blog mates is also another reason for them in putting much effort in minimizing errors and produce good piece of work. Revising their writing in the aspects of content, sentence structure and grammar accuracy is a constant effort by most participants. CMC resulted in the students being extra careful in words selection to express their thoughts considering they are from different social and academic backgrounds. This is derived in the following response, *Yes, through CMC you have to be very clear in whatever you are trying to state. Therefore, you have to be **very precise** with your words.*

3. Motivating the students' participation in blog

The majority of the participants mentioned that they felt more motivated in blog participation. The responses in the open-ended questions indicate that their motivation is due to several reasons. One of the reasons is they had to be aware of their mistakes since they knew that their postings were read by all their blog mates and instructor. Although, the grammatical errors made are not penalized with regard to marks but they still put extra effort to ensure that their errors are minimized. In doing so, they become more inspired to revise their writing at multiple times.

Besides reading others' postings, they also observed the sentence structure and vocabulary usage. Not only they demonstrated the interest to scrutinize their own mistakes, they could also identify the flaws of others. They then worked on the flaws and filled up the gap of the missing piece of information particularly the scope of ideas. The findings also highlight that the students play a more prominent role than the instructor in ensuring the development of collaborative learning. However, the instructor plays an important role in maintaining her presence in the blog community to make sure that process runs smoothly. These statements are echoed by the participants' responses:

> Yes, the blog can be accessed and viewed by the public, so every word which we **write must be carefully.** It makes students be more aware of the Internet and own speech.

> The reason that I felt **inspired is because of other participants' critique.** When I read their critiques, I was able to **detect flaws and missing piece of information.** Hence, I worked on a critique that would highlight the flaws and emphasize on the missing information.

Discussing in a blog is a new experience for most participants and due to that they faced some technical glitches in the initial stage. However, they still admitted that they had fun (… *because it was the first time for me to use a blog and I was **interested to learn the new thing in details.***)

Veermans & Tapola (2004) cited in Deniz (2014) express that the use of CMC provides pleasure and variety which could sustain students' engagement and motivation throughout their learning process. Fun teaching and learning activities heighten students' motivation level (Magee, 2010). Moreover, in this perspective, according to Magee most Generation Y is more inclined towards the integration of technology in classroom activity. Magee also believes that for most Generation Y, technology is a tool for relationship building if it is used in moderation. This statement is depicted by one of the participants' response:

> *I am **personally inclined towards using technology** to solve problems so I figured this is **the easiest pathway.***

Motivation is also viewed in the aspect of convenience which refers to the freedom to be online at any time convenient to them and ample time to think and construct sentences at their own pace. This statement is illustrated by one of the participant's comment:

> *Since interacting through the usage of a blog allows students to have more time to think about what they would like to share, it usually results in sentences that are expressed more kindly.*

Given ample time, they could construct their posting in a less pressured manner. The teacher and the students are free to choose their own convenient time and place to post their messages (Amelia & Mohamed Amin, 2007). They do not have to log on at the same time due to the fact that they do not share the same free hours.

Another motivating factor that pushed the students to comment more honestly is the physical absence. This statement is evidenced by one of the respondent's claim, *It will be **less awkward to comment on others' critique**.* This finding supports Rice and Love's (1987) viewpoint that the absence of nonverbal cues could promote more equal authority, status and turn-taking. This notion is further supported by Scharlott and Christ (1994:1), CMC was found more useful to its communicators since it helps them to overcome the relationship barriers which stem from sex role, shyness and appearance. Consequently, the students would feel less hesitant to express their ideas and correct each other. Moreover, blog as an educational platform is important in the Malaysian context. Many Malaysian students feel shy, timid and reluctant to communicate face-to-face using English which is their second or third language (Warschauer, 1999). In this regard, the absence of physical visibility provides some advantages to the target users.

Findings Related to Challenges of Using Blog
Although CMC benefits the critique discussion among the blog community, there are some challenges that restrict its success. One of the challenges is it does not provide optimum opportunities for effective group interaction compared to face-to-face communication due to lack of non-verbal cues and delayed responses. Three of the participants highlighted,

> *Face-to-face provides better group interaction compared to CMC.*

> *… wheareas face-to-face interactions provide the platform for better explanation and more effective discussions.*

> *On the other hand, face-to-face interactions could improve one's interpersonal skills, body language and nonverbal interactions.*

The instructor's reflective notes highlighted that CMC could be a highly effective platform of self-learning for mature and self-disciplined students. Even though the participants of this study were responsible, the demands of their content courses and their tight schedule restrict them to respond promptly. The delayed responses using blog slow down the process of interaction and discussion. As a result, some students felt not motivated to discuss via blog. The instructor had to constantly remind the students to respond to each other more frequently via blog. This move is parallel to Deniz (2014) who reminds instructors to closely monitor students' progress as to ascertain that students' progression is in accordance to the course objectives. In addition, he insists that necessary adjustments should be made by the instructors.

Another setback posed is low speed Internet connection around the campus resulting in breakdowns which cut off the participants from the network. In order to troubleshoot the problem, some participants either borrowed a broadband device from their course mates or bought a broadband device and paid for the Internet connection service. Thus, the participants' time online is limited by the amount of Internet access they could afford. Due to financial constraint, few students could afford to buy a broadband device. Consequently, they prefer to arrange for face-to-face discussions since the participants stay within the same residential college and study under the same faculty.

CONCLUSION
The current educational climate in tertiary education globally including Malaysia has witnessed the increase use of CMC within and beyond the classroom. Due to economic and logistic benefits, many language courses in the National University of Malaysia integrate CMC in the teaching and learning to increase the students'

opportunity to practice the English language. Despite the success of CMC in enhancing students' writing and thinking skills, our course instructors are still skeptical of integrating CMC in critique writing. Thus, this study was set out to investigate the effectiveness of using blog as a CMC tool in improving students' critique of argumentative texts and to identify its challenges.

In this investigation, it has proven that students are able to accelerate discussion beyond the boundary of time and space. CMC acts as a tool to generate more ideas after comprehending the critique and comments from their blog mates. They were able to use the ample time to revise their ideas multiple times, thus, make their writing more refined and consists more substantial and critical insights. The diverse opinions due to the difference of family background namely culture, religion and geographical location enable the students to widen their thinking horizon and be more critical. In essence, they have proven that they are able to apply the lessons in the class in critique writing via blog. Besides, their motivation which initially was driven by marks later became more intrinsic as the motivation was then sparked by their blog mates' feedback.

The results of study indicated that low speed Internet connection, the absence of non-verbal cues, and delayed responses are some of the CMC setback. Since the students are within close proximity, they prefer face-to-face discussion compared to virtual discussion. CMC is perceived merely as a medium of communication. Apparently, the students felt that face-to-face interaction could better improve their interpersonal skills.

In conclusion, this study has proven that CMC could benefit the students in their critique discussion. However, it could not replace face-to-face interactions especially for students who are logistically close and experiencing low Internet speed. In this regard, CMC could be considered as an 'add on' only. Finally, it is important to note that a course developer needs to balance out its strengths and weaknesses before embracing CMC in the teaching and learning of English. She should consider the technical facilities and support system especially Internet accessibility and high speed connection which are crucial in ensuring the success of online discussion.

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