English Language In Rural Malaysia: Situating Global Literacies In Local Practices

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Abstract

This paper claims that underlying the naturalisation of teaching and learning of English in the Malaysian education system are ideological pressures and political dogmas, often emerging from colonial, urban/rural and even local ethnic conflicts and hierarchies. It suggests therein lie the inherent difficulties of teaching and learning English in rural communities in Malaysia.

Three paradigms frame this view in the paper: the overarching view of literacy as a situated and variable social process; the use of an ethnographic perspective in investigating English language and literacy education in Malaysia; the stance on the need for Malaysians to acquire English as an additive rather than as a deficit philosophy.

1. Viewing Literacy as a Social Process

In defining Literacy, traditionally the general view that has prevailed is that literacy involves the development of technically discrete and basic learned cognitive skills which are testable, measurable and transferable from one context to another. Success is usually measured by the individuals' ability to reach the accepted established levels of literacy skills and standards. It is also within these definitive concepts that individuals are identified unequivocally as illiterates when they cannot reach those standards. This view of literacy is referred to as autonomous literacy (Street 1984, 1995) as it extracts notions of social, cultural, and historical contexts that may impact on literacy learning and practices.

Literacy researchers and practitioners, on the other hand, typically understand literacy as a situated and variable social practice. Viewing literacy as a social process involves examining the behaviours of reading and writing embedded in its social practices. This is in adherence to what Street (1996) calls an "ideological" model of literacy which takes into account "the behavior (sic) and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing" (p. 2) in the society.

The model suggests that language related behaviours like listening, speaking, reading, writing and production of texts are expressions of social practices

sanctioned by particular communities. Additionally, these literacy practices are most often socially and historically constituted aggregates of worldviews, ideologies, values, attitudes, behaviour and thinking of these communities in situated contexts (Koo, 2005). In essence, doing literacy in this context involves acquiring the complex participant roles, identities, languages, representations and artefacts of the community that the learners are socialized into (Gee, 1996).

At the most primary level, this socialization or social process involves the acquisition of vernacular literacies necessary for social and cultural identity as well as meaning-making at the everyday level, those from the family and ethnic community for example (Highmore, 2002). Meanwhile at the secondary level, this social process constitutes institutionalized literacies involving schools, workplaces and government institutions as they are envisioned and benchmarked. The learning and mastery of these institutionalized literacies are most often declared as prerequisites for development and progress of the larger community. In this context, doing literacy is directly linked to development.

Differences between the imposed institutionalized literacy practices and the vernacular literacy practices may lead to conflicts of identities, participant roles and literacy practices, creating disparities in rates of literacy performances and ways of valuing literacies across communites. A case in point is the purported number of school children in Malaysia who are labelled as illiterate by the Ministry of Education recently. It was reported that a total of 162,000 children in primary and secondary (42,000) schools were found to be illiterate by the census. It goes on to claim that majority or more than 70% of this number are primary school students from the rural areas (>113,000). In clarifying the figures, the Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein said some could read but not write while others could count. He continued to qualify that the figures "don't tell you what level the children are at but they are not completely illiterate" (NST 4 June 2006). Today, it has been claimed that more than 93% of Malaysia's urban population are literate (Frank Small and Associates, 1998). Using UNESCO's definition of literacy, the indicators used to measure literacy in the national survey are "the ability to read and write, with understanding, a short simple sentence about one's daily life". The same survey also reported 91% of the rural population "can read".

Another methodology, although less satisfactory, that has been used to measure literacy rate is to consider all those who have attended schools for a specific number of years as literate. Following this logic then, it can be tentatively reported that approximately 96% of the population have received at least six years of formal education. Using the same approach, it is estimated that the 2.3

million or 76.3% primary pupils in national schools (5,789), 620,000 in Chinese schools and more than 80,000 in Tamil schools are multilingually literate in Bahasa Melayu, English, and Mandarin or Tamil . These statistics however do not provide a cross-national survey of literacy amongst the country's population that takes into account the varied stages of development in literacy, the multitude of linguistic and multi-cultural contexts, and the changing priorities for education policies.

Thus, to avoid misrepresentations of literacy rates and practices at the macro level, it is necessary to be cognizant of the vernacular literacies that the communities practise, and investigate the literacy practices that they are already engaged in by viewing literacy as a situated and variable social process. The following section provides insights into the issue of English literacy in Malaysia derived from research in the ethnographic paradigm and from the perspective of viewing literacy as a social process.

2. Ethnographic Perspectives of English Literacy in Malaysia

The tradition of English language education in Malaysia has generally been guided by what is generally considered to be 'state of the art' or 'progressive' ways of approaching learning and teaching the second language by national education developers and native-speaker Western educators. These apparently 'effective methods' or ways of language learning and teaching are simply and generally imposed and are then expected to be successful in the prevailing varying contexts of learning. This approach characterizes the autonomous model of literacy, which perceives literacy as a unitary skill and as context free, without acknowledging the role of other literacies. It ignores the value of vernacular literacy experiences, knowledge, and attitudes of the learners shaped by their mother tongue environments (Hazita Azman, 1999; Gee, 1990; Luke, 1988).

An ethnographic paradigm allows us to 'see' and locate meanings and uses of literacy practices in particular from local perspectives. Being informed of these local conceptions is vital for literacy programme developers and implementers, especially in multilingual contexts such as Malaysia. In the tradition of viewing literacy as a social process, it is necessary to have an ethnographic understanding of how English language is viewed by the local communities and to investigate the extent to which they are situated in the lives of these communities. This entails locating, observing and analysing the uses and meanings of English literacy practices in local spaces in terms of its historical, political, economical and social representations. The section below elucidates this phenomenon by first examining the initial historical and colonial archetypal infrastructure that

was instrumental in situating the English language to create the divide between urban and rural Malaysia.

2.1 English Language, the Colonial Legacy and Globalization

The language issue in Malaysia has always been a contentious topic, and no language has aroused more contentious views than the English language. Before Malaysia gained independence, English as a colonial language was given prominence over vernacular languages. And now, in this globalized era, its resurgence over the national language, Bahasa Melayu, has incited protests from Malay nationalists and Chinese educationists in particular. No matter the degree of acceptance, the nation is resigned to the fact that the English language inevitably remains situated in the language repertoire of Malaysians.

English has taken on many faces since taking permanent residence in Malaysia; from that of colonial master to local elite and urbanite , and currently that of global citizen . The architecture for this situation was designed initially for colonial governance, and then turned into aspirations for nation building and now for global competitiveness. These architectural blueprints began as exclusive designs designated for select elites who controlled the administrative machinery in pre-independence, but later made inclusive in post independence to allow for an identifiable shared geo-politico space in the name of nation building. It is amidst these developments that English is institutionalized as a second language in Malaysia, securing its place in the nation's linguistic landscape. Notwithstanding these developments, which gave rise to its eminent presence in the country, English still remains a stranger in rural communities and is yet to be assimilated significantly into their ways of being, interacting and doing literacy.

The following sections provide a critical perspective of the ways English was designed to be valued, located and positioned in pre-independent Malaya, post-independent Malaysia, and Modern Malaysia. They highlight the ideological intent of the governing hand in directing and shaping the construction of infrastructures that in turn impact on the views, values, learning, teaching and practices of English language literacy in particular.

2.1.1. English in Pre-independence Malaya (Pre-1957)

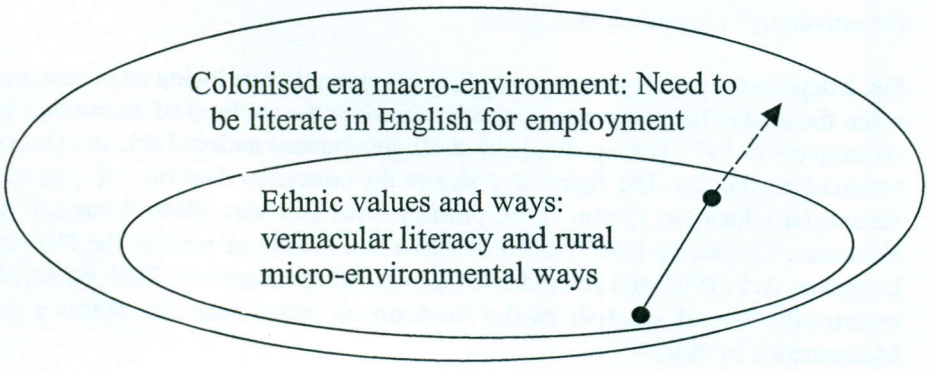
From the perspective of the colonised Malayans during the hey-day of colonialism, the mastery of English meant that natives could be brought closer to the status of their reference group, the white colonials. At the same time, it meant they were advancing along the path of modernity, progress, internationalism and cosmopolitanism (A. Rahman Embong, 2004).

In the pre-independence era , a salient characteristic of English colonization was the colonial master's desire to establish secular education in then Malaya. Education for the natives was divided between English education and the vernacular education systems. The former, most of the time run by missionaries, schooled children of the royal families and affluent non-Malay families, although a very limited number was also allocated for high achievers from the vernacular school system. The English medium schools were found in townships where mainly the local elites, British administration offices and their residential areas are situated.

Meanwhile, the vernacular schools were set up by the colonizers in *kampungs* to teach reading and writing to the peasants so as to produce "more intelligent fisherman or farmers" and to make them understand how they fit into the scheme of life around them (Khoo and Mohd Fadzil, 1980). These schools, located in the rural areas, initiated the dichotomy between rural and urban communities, and between the status of the English language and ethnic vernacular languages.

It soon became apparent that the choice of the medium of instruction created inequality in opportunity whereby the rural child is excluded from participating in the mainstream of the community at large by his inability to read and write in English. This dichotomous situation depicted in Fig 1. sets the tone for the social future of the rural child in terms of English language acquisition. Social mobilization was only possible for the rural child if he mastered the English language as depicted by the dotted arrow. Otherwise, he remained confined to his microenvironment (depicted by the solid line) (Hazita Azman, 2005). Thus the natives were made to feel that being illiterate in English was a deficit and placed one in a specified level in the socio-economic strata.

Fig.1



2.1.2. English in Post-independence Malaysia (1957- 2001)

Independence paved the way for Bahasa Melayu, the language of the colonised, to be elevated to the status of the national and official language of the new nation state. It was planned to be the language for nation-building, a medium for knowledge, a tool for scientific and technological advancement, and for economic progress. It is the language for the realisation of the country's nation-building and modernisation dream (A. Rahman Embong, 2004; Mahathir Mohamed, 2003).

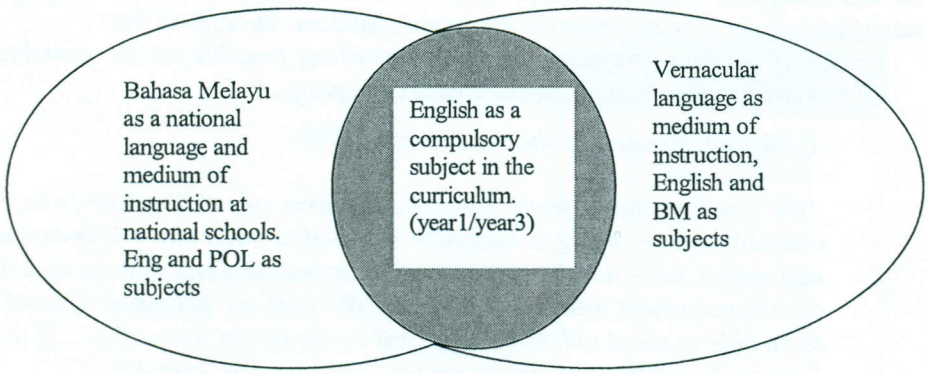
The significant fact about Malaysia then is that at independence 40% of its total population was already made up of Chinese and Indians who remained in their separateness speaking their respective vernacular languages. Thus the independent state was no more the land of the Malays (Tanah Melayu) but a land of plural societies that is multilingual, multicultural, and of course multi-religious. Nevertheless, characterized by such diversity and heterogeneity, the imagined Malaysian society envisaged by the founding fathers would be one united in its diversity through the national language (Bahasa Melayu) and a shared identity (Bangsa Malaysia).

Interestingly, amidst this multilingual background , English did not lose its prominence as it was given the status of a second language after the national language (Bahasa Melayu) and above the other vernacular languages. It even became the language for inter-racial interaction, in early independence, as the local elites become the administrators of the new nation and the ethnic groups remained in their separateness (Asmah, 1983). Meanwhile, English remained separate and elusive to the citizens in the rural areas.

Ideologically, English in the post independence era , although de-emphasized, was still regarded as 'bahasa penjajah' or the colonizers' lingua franca and therefore spiritually resisted. However, the people of the new nation were implored to accept it as "a necessary evil" (Razak Report, 1957), as ironically, it was 'necessary' for the country's economic development. English as a second language in this context "has nothing to do with the acquisition of the language in a temporal context vis a vis a language acquired after the mother tongue, nor does it take into consideration the role it plays as a medium of instruction in the school and the university" (Asmah, 1983; p.230).

Fig. 2 depicts the privileged place English was given despite losing its prominence when the Malay language was institutionalised as the medium of instruction for all subjects in 1971 (except English) at all government national schools (except vernacular schools). The figure also shows the education direction of a parallel vernacular education system at the primary level that was allowed through the Education Ordinance (1957) and Education Act (1961) as well as the National Language Act (1963 and revised 1971), from Independence to 2001 before the re-introduction of English as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics in 2002.

Fig. 2



2.1.3. Modern Malaysia: English in the 21st century

Today, mastery of English signifies the passage to 'competitiveness' of the individual and the nation from the perspective of the market thanks to the spread of neo-liberal globalization powered by technological innovation. The government's decision to reinstitute English as a medium of instruction (MOI) for Science and Mathematics from 2002 predictably brought on fears that the move will lead to a general drop in academic achievement in these subjects which were taught in Bahasa Melayu and Chinese or Tamil languages at national and vernacular schools respectively, for the past 30 years. This concern is profound for students from rural schools.

Education discourses in the knowledge-based era emphatically portray English literacy as instrumental to development, internationalization and globalization. The notion that with English, Malaysia will be progressive and competitive was repeatedly found in the news reports corpus from 2002-2003 to explicate the change in the medium of instruction for Maths and Science. Lexical analysis of these reports (Hazita, 2005; Tan, 2005) revealed personalities representing official voices reiterating definitive roles for English. In nearly 50% of the texts analysed, English is described as ...

"...the language of wider communication"
"...necessary to tap into current knowledge"
"...the lingua franca of business, science, technology and research"
"...help job-seekers become employable"
"...the language of globalization"

(NST, 8 April 2002; Business Times, 23 May 2002; Bernama, 6 July 2002)

At the ideological level, the English revival is viewed as a betrayal to nationalism and the national language. With regard to this sentiment , Tun Mahathir, the man responsible for this change in language of instruction reminds us that the whole concept of nationalism needs to be re-defined in this new millennium. He stresses that:

> *"...True nationalism means doing everything possible for the country, even if it means learning the English language."*
>
> (Mahathir Mohamed, *The Sun*, 11 Sept 1999)

> *"We need to move from the extreme form of nationalism which concentrates on being a language nationalist only, not a knowledge nationalist, not a development oriented nationalist. I feel that we should be a development oriented nationalist. We want our people to succeed, to be able to stand tall, to be respected by the rest of the world. ... If we have no knowledge we will be servants to those with knowledge."*
>
> (Mahathir Mohamed, Interviewed by Gill & Hazita, 16 June 2005)

On these premises, English in the 21st century reclaims its importance in Malaysia as the mandated second language, the prevailing language for the globalized and Digital Age, with the instrumental function of enabling Malaysia to leap frog into the global arena.

The underlying ideological difference in the approach adopted to promote the need for English from that of the colonized (pre-independence) and the national unity era (post-independence) is that the citizens of the nation are encouraged to develop multilingual skills in respecting the inherent diversity of cultures and languages of Malaysian society, whilst giving socio-cultural permission for English to be part of the Malaysian 'linguistic scenery' (a term from Asmah, 1992). In this view, multilingualism including mastery of English is additive rather than subtractive and becomes another principal identity of *Bangsa Malaysia* (the Malaysian citizen). Herein lies the notion that English in Malaysia should then be accepted as another Malaysian language. The Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein had recently strongly suggested that:

> *"English may have been the language of the colonial masters but it was also the language which our founding fathers acquired, took to London, and returned as masters of their own land. Forty-eight years on we should not be shy to say English is a Malaysian language."*
>
> (NST, August 25 2005)

This pronouncement along with other similar statements made in the same vein by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister himself in encouraging especially rural students to learn English more intensively give the all-important official cue for the drive to once again excel in the language.

While the multilingual education system has produced multiliterate Malaysians of the 21st century who are literate to varying degrees of language proficiency and combinations, in Bahasa Melayu, English, Chinese and Tamil, the challenge facing rural communities is the acquisition of proficiency in English literacy as this feature of rural-urban divide remains the bane of rural development . In addition, the rural Malaysian child in the 21st century faces the challenges posed by technological innovations of acquiring literacy from mainly screen based information resources.

Meanwhile the main channel through which English is brought into the rural areas is through the education system. Before 2003, English was confined to classrooms as a subject and students were traditionally taught about the language rather than how to use the language for communication, although the advocated methodology was the integrated approach with elements of communicative language teaching (CLT) principles underpinning it. Rural schools were provided with English textbooks that were " appropriate for limited English proficiency students" (MoE, 1997).

3. Multilingualism and Rural Literacy Practices

Hazita Azman (1999) conducted an ethnographic research on literacy practices in selected rural[1] Malaysia taking into account the varied stages of development in literacy, the multitude of linguistic and multi-cultural contexts, and the changing priorities for education policies. The study provides insights into these varied stages of development in literacy experienced by the multilingual and multicultural communities in rural Malaysia.

The research involved 400 residents of four rural communities most of whom were students, farmers, fishermen, plantation workers, railroad workers, army personnel, government officers, and small business owners. These research participants comprised individuals, aged 10-11 years (n288) and 30-65 years (n112), from 12 schools and 40 families, who were fathers, mothers, children, grandparents and live-in relatives.

To find out the extent of multilingualism among them, the respondents were asked to rank the languages they could "speak, read and/or write well in". The term "well" in this study is defined as being "proficient enough to understand" for reading and "proficient enough to be understood" for speaking and writing (Hazita Azman, 1999). A multilingual, in the broadest definition of multilingualism, is described as anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active or passive communication., while, the terms bilingual and trilingual are used more specifically to describe comparable situations in which two or three languages are involved.

The findings revealed that the 400 research respondents spoke, read and wrote "well" in 38 possible combinations of Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, Tamil and Arabic. Interestingly all ethnic groups reported that they could read and write well in at least three languages as a result of formal education. It is also interesting to note that among the three ethnic groups, the Indians were found to be the most multilingual, while some of the Malays and the Chinese revealed that they were still monolingual. These were found to be older relatives who had not received formal education, with some who claimed to be illiterate. Table 1a shows the most frequent combinations of languages used across ethnic groups in speaking, reading and writing.

Speaking and Multilingualism: The findings revealed that the rural communities spoke Malay, Chinese dialects, Tamil and Indian dialects, and some Arabic. The table below lists the languages the respondents claimed to speak well. Please note that any languages spoken by the Chinese have been categorized as *Chinese language* for practical reasons. Likewise, Tamil and other dialects spoken by the Indian community have been categorized as *Indian language.*

Table 1a: Speaking among rural Malay, Chinese, Indian groups in percentages (ranked)

Language	Ethnicity		
Speak well in:	**Malay***	**Chinese**	**Indian**
Indianl/Malay			85
Malay only	70		
Chinese/Malay		56	
Chinese only		32	
Malay/English	20		
Indian/Malay/English			15
Chinese/Malay/English		12	
Malay/Arabic	10		

It should be noted that the Indians were found to be the most multilingual and claimed to speak more English while a number of the Malays and the Chinese admitted they did not speak any English at all. It is also worth noting that a very small percentage (2%) or 8 Malay respondents had indicated that they can converse in Tamil and Mandarin quite proficiently but not read or write in these languages.

As suggested before, it is not an exaggeration to say that almost all Malaysians are multilingual, that is bilingual or trilingual. Among the three main ethnic groups[2], Malay, Chinese and Indian, literacy surveys have revealed that Indians are the most multilingual while Malays the least. Indians have been found to be able to speak Tamil or an Indian dialect, Malay, and English. Some have even picked up Mandarin. Likewise, the Chinese can speak Mandarin or a Chinese dialect,

Malay, and English. Meanwhile, although a small percentage of Malays have been reported to be able to speak some Chinese dialects and some Tamil or Hindi, the majority are only bilingual in Malay or a Malay dialect and English. The indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak speak their ancestral languages (Dayak etc) as well.

However, being multilingual does not mean that the levels of competency in these languages are balanced and reach the level of native speaker standards. Most Malaysians, for example, when asked to self-rate their language repertoire may report varying degrees of proficiency for each language and even for different language skills. For example, it is common to find the following combination of multilingualism and levels of proficiency among Malaysians:

Scale	Bahasa Melayu	English	Chinese dialect	Indian dialect
Very Proficient	Speak Read			Speak
Proficient	Write			Read
Adequately Proficient		Speak Read		Write
Quite Proficient		Write		
Not at all			*	

Scale	Bahasa Melayu	English	Chinese dialect	Indian dialect
Very Proficient	Speak Read			
Proficient	Write	Speak Read Write		
Adequately Proficient				
Quite Proficient				
Not at all			*	*

Scale	Bahasa Melayu	English	Chinese dialect	Indian dialect
Very Proficient			Speak	
Proficient	Speak Read Write	Speak	Read	
Adequately Proficient		Read	Write	
Quite Proficient		Write		
Not at all				*

This varying degree in proficiency is natural and expected in any multilingual society. However, when the future and potentials of the society and the country greatly depends on the strength of its people to acquire and to apply knowledge

in the language it is communicated in, acquiring the target language and reaching its established standards should be the emphasis that guides its language planning and policy.

Reading, Writing and Multilingual literacy events: Where reading and writing were concerned, , Hazita's study revealed that mainly fathers and children read well and in various languages (Table 1b).

Table 1b: Ability to read among rural Malay, Chinese, Indian groups in percentages (ranked)

Language	Ethnicity		
Read well in:	**Malay***	**Chinese**	**Indian**
Tamil/Malay			32
Malay/English/Arabic	23		
Tamil/Malay/English			21
Malay/Arabic	20		
Mandarin/Malay/English		19	
Malay only	14		
Malay/English	12		
Mandarin only		10	
Malay/Mandarin		6	

In general the data shows that all the ethnic groups read in Bahasa Melayu. The data also shows that while the Indians were more frequent bilingual readers, interestingly, the Malays claimed to read more materials in English. This was mainly because most Malay parents had completed formal education and were employed in the government service while their children engaged in school assignments that required them to read Malay and English materials. Table 1.b.i below depicts the types of reading materials most read by the participants and the languages they are read in.

Table 1.b.i: Types of reading materials most read at home in percentages

Type	Ethnicity			Language			Other
%	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Combination
Newspapers	28	**39**	33	20	**30**	14	14 Mal/Tam **8 Mal/Eng** 5 Mal/Tam/Eng 6 Mal/Mand 3 Mal/Mand/Eng

Type	Ethnicity			Language			Other
%	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Combination
School Books	30	35	**35**	**23**	20	**20**	**15 Mal/Tam/Eng** 15 Mal/Man/Eng 13 Mal/Eng/Arab
Magazines/ comics	**35**	35	31	25	19	16	15 Mal/Tam/Eng 14 Mal/Mand/Eng 8 Mal/Eng **6 Eng only**

Among the three groups, it was found that reading newspapers, especially among the Chinese; reading for school, especially among the Indians; and reading magazines, especially among the Malays ranked as the top three types of reading materials. It was also found that Malays read Malay and English dailies the most, while to a limited extent, reading in English only was practised by children reading comics and newspapers (NIE) for school work. Data from field observations and interviews also revealed that reading at home was a behaviour that was largely related to school literacy events engaging parent and child, or between siblings.

Literacy events involving adults revolved around newspapers and magazines, were usually carried out individually, and occurred in short periods of time (usually not more than 30 minutes). Most often they were engaged in seeking information about current events (usually news and political issues) as well as about public figures (usually entertainment personalities).

Writing practices: The research found that writing activities at home were minimal and mainly related to school and work, and only occasionally for social interaction purposes. Most often the children and the fathers engaged in writing practices at home while most of the mothers who were housewives demonstrated functional literacy practices that were mainly related to housekeeping or childminding. Additionally most mothers disclosed that even when they did oversee their children doing school work, their participation was mainly to discipline (that is to ensure the child finished the homework) rather than to tutor or engage in the school work directly with their children.

Table 1c: Writing among Rural Malay, Chinese, Indian groups in percentages (ranked)

Language	Ethnicity		
Write well in:	**Malay***	**Chinese**	**Indian**
Tamil/Malay/Eng			31
Mandarin/Malay/Eng		21	
Malay/Eng/Arabic	20		
Malay only	19		
Malay/Arabic	8		
Malay/English	7		
Mandarin only		14	

In general, writing at home was largely carried out by the children in the medium of their school subjects, Malay and English and/or Mandarin or Tamil. The Indian and Chinese children reported that they were given a lot of writing practice by their vernacular schools, especially in writing Tamil and Mandarin script respectively. These activities were usually discrete items for intensive practice and did not engage children in extended and expanded literacy activities. This data on literacy practices presented confirms that multilingual literacy is very much a part of the culturally diverse rural Malaysia as it is across the nation and that English language literacy although disconnected from cultural identity is situated in rural communities as school related literacy.

5. School Literacy Practices in Rural Communities

Ethnographic observations of English language teaching in twenty rural primary classrooms at the 12 schools in the study uncovered an assembly of teacher stylized methodologies that included in most parts the use of translation as a teaching strategy (Hazita Azman, 1999). The most common reason given by the 20 English language teachers who were interviewed in explaining their use of translation as a strategy in teaching English was that they found it worked in helping their students to quickly understand meaning as well as how the target language works.

Generally, it was found that teachers used Bahasa Melayu or the vernacular languages during English lessons in most circumstances that involved:

1. giving classroom management instructions
2. describing meaning of words and concepts or ideas
3. explaining grammatical rules and concepts
4. motivating and or consoling students
5. giving instructions on how to carry out tasks or activities.

Another observation was that there were very limited instances in the English classroom when students were engaged in communication for real purposes.

It was also observed that English language teaching typically revolved around reading passages, and related language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing were extensions from the reading activity. Most of the teachers believed that 'reading a lot' would provide students with vocabulary and grammatical input to help them build writing skills. Guided by the belief that reading should precede writing, it was commonly found that the teachers gave less emphasis to writing. Meanwhile, listening and speaking activities were conducted through very limited and contrived dialogue exercises provided in the textbooks (Hazita Azman, 1999).

Another interesting finding was that students in the case studies were seldom given English language assignments to do at home as the teachers had found that most of the students never completed them, using excuses that they did not know how to do so and had no resources at home to assist them.

As reported earlier (Table 1 b-c), students and their family members in the same research study revealed that reading and writing events involving English that did occur at home were very low in frequency and most of the time related to school work. This limited the use of English and its literacy practices in the rural communities to the physical environment of the schools and to school- related work respectively.

According to the integrated Curriculum of Primary School and prior to the use of English as medium of instruction for Maths and Science, primary school students in national schools should receive a total of 210 to 240 minutes (4 hours) of English per week, while children at vernacular schools receive only 90 minutes (1.5 hours) per week and only after primary three (at 9 years of age). It can thus be assumed that the rural child only receives this amount or fewer contact hours of English.

An important consideration emerging from these ethnographic depictions of rural encounters with the English language brings to bear the reality that English situated in rural circumstances takes on the qualities of a foreign language and thus the business of learning and teaching English in rural areas merits specialized attention and should be addressed expediently. This is why perhaps the use of translation, for example, in teaching should be adopted as a useful strategy but teachers should be properly trained in how to use it effectively.

5. Infrastructure Development for Literacy Learning

Infrastructure wise, rural schools in the study were found to have made it a point to designate spaces for English literacy events. These areas include reading corners or self access corners, reading gazebos or huts, and library or resource centres. In terms of print material, the schools' collections of English books are found to be adequate in numbers. However not many books were borrowed by the students because they found most of the books *"difficult to read, boring, old, or not having time to read"*.

Only two of the twelve schools had a computer lab and computers. Even so these computers were rarely used for teaching and learning. Only the principal of one of the schools got teachers to choose and purchase CD-ROM for students to learn English, Bahasa Melayu and Maths.

In the communities, communication infrastructures with an education focus was slowly making inroads through rural development plans and projects. At the time of the research cyber cafes and community ICT centres were some of the introductions planned by the Ministry of Rural Development. Nationwide, it was reported that a total of 70% of primary school (5010) and 46% or 758 of secondary school still did not have access to computer facilities; while a total of 6478 or 90% of primary and 1082 or 66% of secondary schools did not have internet access (International Labour Organization, 1996-2000).

The ILO report also estimated that the ratio of urban households to rural households owning personal computers (PCs) and having access to the internet was 13:10. Income disparity between urban and rural households was the main factor. Telephone and electricity supply and coverage have been extensive in Malaysia. Even then, 7% of the rural population was still without 24-hour electricity supply.

While these findings from case studies should not be generalised, they provide to a certain extent a window to view how English language literacy learning and teaching was conducted in some rural schools. However, as it becomes increasingly imperative for all Malaysians in the 21st century to master English, the limited standard in English literacy that is currently experienced by rural school students has become a major concern. As Malaysia embraces globalization and the development of a knowledge- based society, it has also become increasingly apparent that being literate in the 21st century entails skills beyond the basic ability to read and write in English.

6. Conclusion

While the study concluded that the rural communities investigated had a high literacy rate in Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin, and Tamil, literacy in English language was limited and confined to the physical environment of the school and school

work related practices and literacy events. Thus the school is the instrumental infrastructure through which ideologies of English literacy practices are channelled and sustained in the rural communities.

But the reality of Malaysia's education system is that there are at least 2.3 million or 76.3% of primary pupils in national schools (5,789), 620,000 in Chinese schools and more than 80,000 in Tamil schools. Among these, 4,036 are in rural schools. Out of this figure, 84.3% of primary schools in Malaysia are classified as rural schools; at the secondary level, the percentage of rural schools is 5.1%. (MOE, 1996)

In its latest proposal to raise the performance of rural schools (MOE/EPRD, 1996), MOE identified five categories of 'rural' schools based on basic facilities, communication and parental socio-economic status. These categories are:

i) Remote schools - schools in isolated areas, having no infrastructure and basic facilities.
ii) Traditional village schools - schools in traditional Malay villages, having moderate infrastructure but the socio-economic status of the population is still low.
iii) Planned settlement schools - schools in estates and other areas of planned agricultural activities, run by agencies such as FELDA.
iv) Sub-urban schools - schools neighbouring town areas, endowed with facilities and good infrastructure but the socio-economic status of the population is low.
v) High-risk schools - schools in urban or sub-urban areas, with low academic achievement, disciplinary problems and the majority of students from low socio-economic background.

The plan for achieving the aims of Vision 2020 in rural development envisage a transformation which involves both the mental development of the people themselves through literacy education programmes and a great improvement in the quality of their surroundings in terms of upgrades in infrastructure.

Until social, economic and cultural environments in the rural communities transform to include increased reliance and use of the English language for knowledge building, English language in the rural areas will remain a stranger in the linguistic landscapes of the multilingual community. When designing and planning for literacy development programmes and projects, it is pertinent for education developers and implementers to be informed of the local cultures of learning, where roles of teachers, students and the community, and ways of learning and meaning making should be understood and recognized politically, socially and culturally.

Although it is important to note that what happens in a specific classroom is influenced by political, social, and cultural factors of the larger community, each classroom is unique in the way the learners and teachers in that classroom interact with one another in the learning of English. Given the diversity of local cultures of learning, local teachers must be given the right and the responsibility to employ methods that are culturally sensitive and productive in their students' learning of English (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). Hence one of the major assumptions that need to be redressed is the notion of teaching English not as a second or foreign language but as an International language recognizing the diverse ways in which plurilingual (borrowing a term from Koo Yew Lie, 2005) speakers make use of English to fulfil their specific purposes.

Situating English language learning in local practices is further effected when using source culture content in materials. This minimizes the potential of marginalizing the values and lived experiences of the learners. For such a view is in keeping with the political motto "think globally, act locally" which translated into a language pedagogy might be "global thinking, local teaching" (p200). Source culture content can also encourage learners to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture and to learn the language needed to explain these cultural elements in English to individuals from different cultures.

Cortazzi and Jin (1996, 1999) distinguish three types of cultural information that can be used in language textbooks and materials:

1. source culture materials—draw on learners' own culture as content.
2. target culture materials—use the culture of the native English country
3. international target culture—use a great variety of cultures in English and non-English speaking countries around the world.

And finally, the skills envisioned for the 21st century (NCERL, 2000) have revealed two equally important facts about the Digital age. Firstly, technological innovation definitely has direct and significant impact on the economic and social transformations of communities and what counts as literacy. Secondly, information and communication technologies are deeply dependent on literacy.

From this perspective then, it is increasingly clear that the new millennium has brought onto us new ways of practising and thinking about literacy and how it operates in the globalized and technology-mediated world. In literacy education, what the 21st century demands of the learners across all age groups and of teaching are:

1. learners who are proficient in four interrelated dimensions of language use. Luke and Freebody (2002) have identified the textual resources that students need to access to be literate as: code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst.

2. teaching that uses multimodal texts to provide a bridge between the real-life texts of the community and school texts and encourage a real-world, interdisciplinary approach to learning through the use of disciplined knowledge.
3. curriculum approach that harness diversity and leads learner transformation through a focus on four knowledge processes—experiencing, conceptualising, analysing and applying.

(Healy, 2004; Luke and Freebody, 2002)

Within this framework traditional school literacies that is, reading, writing and arithmetic must be transformed and refined in the context of an information and multimodal environment (Warlick, 2004).

In closing, I would like to reiterate the importance for education developers and implementers that literacy practices whether print-based or technology based is inherently embedded in one's social context. Being literate means being able to read, write and communicate in the social, economical and political contexts. Creating a community of practice for English literacy in the rural community, characterized by mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of language(s) (to borrow Wenger's term, 1998) could possibly help provide the interaction between physical local spaces and cognitive relationships for language and literacy development without stripping these practices of their meanings.

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[1] Rural is defined as areas with population density of less than 1,000 persons per square mile and that with more than 1,000 is categorized as urban.

[2] The writer acknowledges other ethnicities and languages that make up modern Malaysia but is limiting the scope of this paper only to the major ethnic groups namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians and their languages.

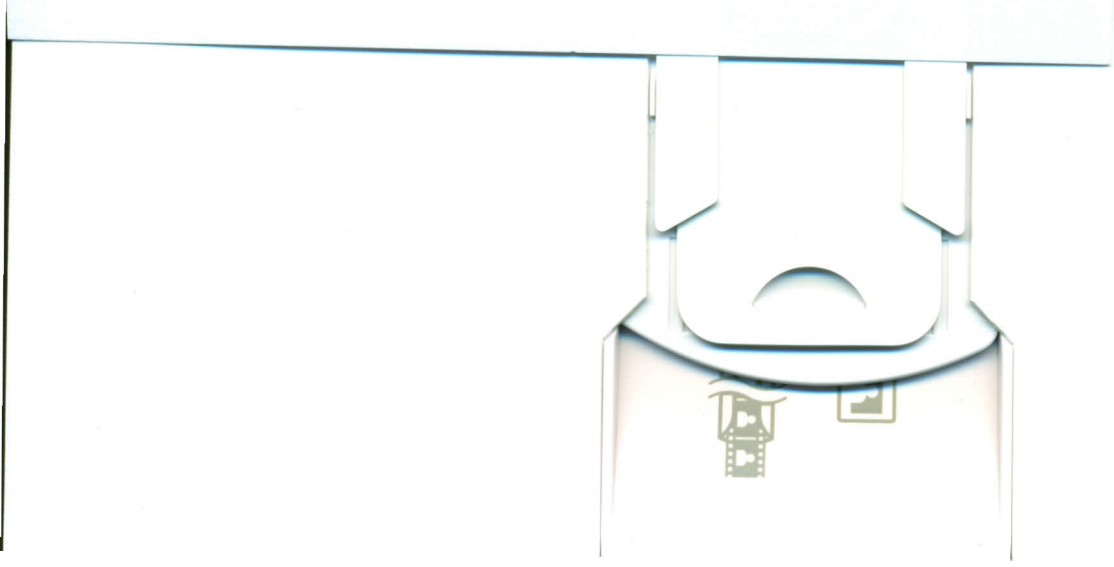
Colonised era macro-environment: Need to be literate in English for employment in urban areas

Ethnic values and ways: vernacular literacy and rural micro-environmental ways

Bahasa Melayu as a national language and medium of instruction at national schools. Eng and POL as subjects

English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. (year 1/year 3)

Vernacular language as medium of instruction, English and BM as subjects



Working with Global English: The Experience of English Language Teachers in a University Language College

Peter Kell and Gillian Vogl

Abstract

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with English Language teachers employed at a university bridging college, this paper explores the challenges that teachers face in preparing international students for university life in Australia. Findings from this research suggest that the narrow business focused objectives of the English Language market undermine more holistic approaches to teaching English. A more holistic approach is required to respond to the social and cultural needs of students while they are studying in Australia. Nevertheless, this research suggests that regardless of the instrumental and reductionist neo liberal philosophy which informs these programs, meaningful intercultural dialogue, critical thinking and some holistic learning does take place.

Introduction

This paper documents and describes the experiences of English language teachers in an Australian university language college. The teachers in the college are involved in preparatory English language programs for international students who are seeking entry into university courses in a range of disciplines. The teachers are experienced English teachers whose role is to ensure that their non English speaking students meet the required standard for entry into their chosen course and also become accustomed to life in Australia. The preparatory programs that these teachers work in fulfil an important role in acting as a conduit to university studies for the students and maintaining a viable commercial profile for the colleges and the university in an increasingly competitive trans-national market in higher education. The paper explores some of the dilemmas and tensions concerning the teaching of English in the context of a highly competitive education market and the way in which teachers and their organizations respond to the pressures of the market, as a well as, the dynamic and changing nature of English within academic settings.

If there is one salient feature that differentiates English from other global languages, it is the way in which English has been subject to commodification

and characterized as a marketable product (Habermas, 1990). The English Language teaching business has been, and remains, one of the main growth industries in the past 50 years (Crystal, 2003, p.112). The growth of this industry has been partly fuelled by the movement of international students moving across the globe to gain overseas credentials in English speaking countries where the status and esteem of degrees from developed nations are seen to provide advantages in opportunities for careers, migration and further education. Many Asian international students travel to Australian universities to gain credentials and expertise and this has placed a new significance on English as the medium of instruction and as the principle language of the academy. Combined with the ascendancy of English in communications, technology and entertainment, the English language has assumed a hegemonic status that has provided Australia with a lucrative business opportunity within the Asia Pacific Region (Singh and Doherty, 2004, p.10).

There are added complexities for students and teachers because English has never been a pure and single language and there are a huge variety of Englishes across the globe (Singh, Kell and Pandian, 2002, p. 29). Australian English represents one of these hybrid Englishes and presents international students with challenges in comprehension and understanding of the colloquial and informal nature of Australian discourse (Kell and Vogl, 2005).

While this diversity of Englishes is a feature of English across the globe, many of the products and pedagogies of English programs in a commodified market context have a hegemonic quality by legitimating ideas about immutable universal standards that obscure ethnocentric bias (Singh and Doherty, 2004, p.16). The consumption of this hegemonic English language is increasingly being viewed as imperative to achieve upward social mobility in the international marketplace (Singh and Doherty, 2004, p.16). Crystal (2003, p.74) provides the example of how in 1999, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore speaking at a National Rally day asked Singaporeans to cut down on their Singlish (a mixture of English, Chinese and Malay) and to use 'Standard English', to enable Singapore to maintain a competitive edge in the international arena.

In the Asia Pacific region, Australia has led a major shift towards the commercialisation of English Language which has resulted in ELT, once seen as a non-commercial vocation being placed within a very narrow business orientated framework. This transformation of English into a marketable commodity creates ethical dilemmas for English language teachers (Singh et al, 2002, p.7).

ESL teachers often experience a range of dilemmas and conflicting pressures. They find themselves increasingly working within a neo liberal context which both undermines their own working conditions and their ability to teach English

to international students in a broader and more situated context. Furthermore, they have to grapple with the tension associated, on the one hand, with providing students with the skills to survive mainstream university, yet on the other hand, a feeling of uneasiness about imposing on student's ethnocentric Western constructions of what it is to be an "ideal" learner.

According to Singh et al (2002, p.185), the IELT industry is characterised by a 'just in time culture' where the demands of the global market produce a range of contradictions for teachers. Teachers face increased anxiety over proficiency, quality assurance, and the constant need for flexibility in responding to clients while coping with the increasing casualisation and de-professionalisation of their vocations.

The work of education and teachers is also being increasingly framed around the demands for measurable end products driven by national economic objectives. Teachers are also required to produce these outcomes in a context where many of the decisions impacting on their working lives are subject to the unstable and dynamic nature of the precarious markets. This connection to measurable outcomes has created a situation where work that does not lead to easily recognisable outcomes is seen as 'non productive' (Davies and Bransel, 2005, pp. 48-50). This means the need to fulfil the requirements of qualifying for entry into the academy and meeting the required language standard takes precedence over broader social and cultural language needs.

Studies, such as, Novera's (2004, p. 475) show that a crucial element in the achievement of success for international students is not only their academic adjustment but also their adjustment to the social and cultural environment. A more situated approach to teaching English is required for this adjustment but arguably neo liberal conceptions of time and value do not allow for this more holistic focus on English.

Singh and Doherty (2004, p.13) claim that many difficulties that Asian international students may experience in their adjustment to university life in Australia are often explained by "notions of culture shock". This, they argue, places the responsibility of adaptation with the students rather than with the institutions in which they study and there has been debate about the importance of internationalising the curriculum and the way international students are taught, there are questions in this study which explore the extent to which the role of teachers is to teach non-Western international students how to be like 'Western learners'. Singh and Doherty (2004, p.19) argue that this produces ethical dilemmas for teachers who are expected to sell Western conceptions of English, learning and study skills while respecting and valuing cultural diversity. However, many Asian students themselves are not likely to internalise notions of Western superiority uncritically, regardless of the market value of this knowledge.

The data below is part of a much larger trans-national study, "Global English and the Global University" which principally explored how English Language can be enhanced in the Asia Pacific in the context of the globalisation of universities. The usage and proficiency of English language was examined in two Universities in two countries in the Asia Pacific region, Australia and Malaysia. The project was funded by the Global Development Network of the World Bank. This study was part of the Australian component of this project, and involved interviews with English language teachers both individually and in a focus group settings.

Teachers in this study were involved in ten-week programs that can be broadly described as English for academic purposes that "front-end" university studies. These fee-paying programs required International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores of 5.0 to 5.5 for entry and were discipline specific with specialisations in the Arts and Social Sciences and Science and Technology. The programs are conducted on a ten-week cycle and the charges for these programs are between $3,360 for a ten-week course and $5,040 for a fifteen-week course. The College is a private subsidiary of a well-known Australian university and intakes include students from over 70 countries. For the purposes of this research the institution will be called Beachways College. The college offered services such as Home stays with Australian families and occasional visits and excursions to familiarise students with the Australian environment. The College has invested in developing its own learning resources and some of the materials are web based. Students are aiming to achieve an IELTS score of 6.5 for entry into the university.

Teachers Talk on International Students

The teachers said that their student groups at Beachways College had strong representation from Asia with a large proportion of Chinese students. The teaching staff talked about the challenges of working with international students and the changes that occurred over the time they had worked in English language teaching. Many teachers described the impact of diversification and the changing nature of the student body:

> *So for example five, six, seven years ago we had a lot of students that had Australian scholarships and we were actually getting the elite from those countries. But now we are getting a lot of people who have actually failed in their own system and so here we have got different needs, different reasons for coming and this is influencing how the students behave and perform.*

The policy contexts of internationalisation associated with neo-liberal education market and the highly competitive environment of English language teaching were well recognised by the teachers. They recognised that Beachways University

might not attract the top-level students and they needed to respond creatively to the tensions between entry standards and the student capabilities:

> *The attention between educational objectives and values and commercial objectives and values there is ongoing tension continually. I think in an ideal world we would love to have our students enter at a higher level and stay with us a lot longer. But the reality is that there are competitors out there and it is financially impossible.*

The tensions in the market were also manifested in the instrumental and functional perspective that students had about English.

> *I think it depends what they are really there for and students really aren't coming to learn English as such, they are coming to learn purely to get them to university and to go through a degree program. And whilst it would be wonderful to sort of teach them English in general terms, that is not their need.*

The language needs of the students emerged as a result of the text-based nature of the learning conducted in their home countries. A college director identified the impact that this has on the program.

> *It's their listening and speaking and in particular their listening that is very low. I remember one student arrived who almost got one hundred percent on the placement test in the writing and the vocabulary and the reading, but he could speak hardly a word of English. So he had to go down to a very low level class because of this. So it has meant that we've had to sort of put in more activities in the listening and speaking areas into the program.*

The staff confirmed the observations of students that the prior learning of English was conducted through formal reading based courses and that this left students with problems in dealing with aural and spoken English.

> *When I ask my students to give me some background as to how many years they have been learning English and how they have learnt English it is usually the same method, you know, I've learnt from a textbook or I've learnt English from a teacher who is not an English native speaker. So some of them have actually been learning English for anything up to twelve, fifteen years. But what they forget to talk about is for how many hours a week they have been learning English and their lack of practice in spoken English. It is mostly written work.*

One teacher described how teachers needed to adjust their teaching to incorporate more situated language teaching that assisted the students' spoken English. This also involves approaching the teaching of English in a more informal manner.

The challenge is really getting or giving them the opportunity to speak English in a more relaxed atmosphere. They have their classes, you either teach them skills or context say in Geography but all of them, particularly when they are coming from the one culture, I think although they have academic listening and speaking as a subject, because we have so many students from one nationality in particular we are having a major problem getting them to practise speaking English, especially in a more relaxed atmosphere. So getting their pronunciation improved. So I think there needs to be more emphasis on this because they have to learn how to speak it and build up their confidence.

This need for more spoken English practice and exposure was also seen to be something that the mainstream international university students appeared to need. One area identified as being of particular difficulty for students of non-English background has been the formal tutorial presentation. A teacher spoke of the strategies adopted in responding to this need

When the students come to me from the University they can't do their presentations properly and the lecturers are complaining. I actually set them on a program where they come and talk with me for half an hour and we go through some of their vocabulary and so on and then I put them on to a particular program and then they come back. So it's drill, pronunciation practise and then personal conversation.

In the context where communication skills are minimal the teachers also spoke of the additional requirement to meet various pastoral and welfare needs that the students had in adjusting to the Australian way of life and the university study routine.

I think there is a double challenge as well for me in that I'm trying to reach educational outcomes but also their welfare. There is more in terms of nurturing and student's welfare which I never really had to worry about before.

Teachers' views of students were positive and they spoke of their students with respect and understanding. They saw students as hardworking dedicated and showing improvement in their proficiency as well as growing as individuals:

I'd just like to look at this the other way round. What often surprises me and impresses me with the students is despite all the pressures which you have talked about which are very real, how many of them survive and flourish and do well and make the most of the experience and take it back with them and it will be a turning point in their lives for many of them. It is difficult but when you are twenty years old you can cope with that kind of difficulty and it's good for you and it's a terrific experience.

Teachers spoke sympathetically of the efforts of their students and empathised with their situation in having to demonstrate proficiency in both academic English as well as colloquial English. The teachers spoke of students experiencing extreme fatigue:

> *They also get exhausted. There is a nice fine line between the pressures of getting through the course. They want that figure so they can get to Uni. They've got that goal and exhaustion from learning and being able to deal with all they have to learn and using the English language. At a Home stay when they come home, you know quite often they just can't speak anymore in English.*

Teachers were impressed with the commitment of students and made favourable comparisons to Australian students who with the advantage of first language status, failed to display the commitment and success of their overseas counterparts:

> *I am overwhelmingly impressed comparing them with Australian students at that level; many of whom I don't know because I haven't done research into Australian high school students at the moment. But I would doubt that very many of them could produce the sort of essays that our students are producing with English as a second language and they are struggling with both content and the actual language. I think basically a lot of them are doing very well.*

Many teachers spoke of the difficulties that their graduates experienced in the mainstream university environment where they believed that university lecturers, while well versed in their disciplines, lacked the skills to assist students in their formal academic English.

> *I suspect and I have no evidence about this one way or the other is that the non-specialist universities, staff who are specialist in their own subjects rather than in English, really don't have any idea how little the students are understanding them while they are lecturing. I mean I don't know whether this is right or not but it is a gut feeling that I have and certainly they probably don't have much preparation to help them to teach international students.*

These challenges were seen positively as part of the changing nature of the English

> *I guess something else that works is the power of positive thinking, always encouraging them and looking at the good, you know, the glass is half full not half empty and encouraging people to keep going and keep their dreams and their goals in sight no matter what the obstacles and saying that the obstacles and problems are natural and normal and hopefully give constructive criticism.*

Teachers Talking About Teaching Global English

The teachers considered that the demands of the market and the need to qualify for entry had reduced student's interests in English beyond the requirements of academic English. There is confirmation of the vocationalisation of English but one teacher suggested that the very nature of English had changed significantly and that there was a new form of English:

> *We are teaching people essentially who want to be able to go back to Shanghai and Beijing and do better than they can now because they can use English. The kind of English that we are teaching is, the phrase that I heard last week is "this is starting to be called Off-Shore English", that is an English which is not the first language of anybody who is using it and which is therefore stripped of a lot of its idiomatic richness and peculiar vocabulary. The language of International Business if you like and the question then is to what extent is that we should be teaching or do we actually try to teach them some of the richness, the poetry and the beauty of this language and give them access to the culture that they are going to be living in for three or four years. Where are the limits of our professional responsibility in that respect.*

Teachers in the language college do not parallel the employment practices of mainstream university, The English language school Beachway was a company owned by the university and had been structured to compete on equal terms with private language schools in the English Language Intensive Course of Studies (ELICOS). This gave the university company flexibility in its employment practices. Several teachers spoke of the way in which their work was considered by their university community and how this positioned their work as a commercial activity.

> *People often see the College as not being "real university" or they often get very suspicious of our motives or where our money is coming from or what function we actually are performing; the commercialisation of education as not a pure form of academia.*

They also spoke of the impact of the employment conditions which were dependent on the ability of the university college to attract students and the dilemmas in keeping a teaching workforce in place.

> *At the moment there is not enough work for everybody. Most of us or those of us who have got casual or sessional have got a few hours... The supervisor tries to spread it across to try to keep everybody.*

As participants in the casual employment market, teachers spoke of the demands that this places on the teachers' lives as having up sides and downsides that contrasted with other teachers in schools:

> *The other side of that is that although we have insecure employment we also have the strange situation where we don't have regular holidays so we may finish the end of a course, bang the following week immediately you start a new course with a new group of students. So we've got a* ***fairly flexible*****…..** *Whereas I've got friends who are school teachers and they are getting regular breaks. So that can be physically and psychologically challenging.*

The teaching duties as mentioned before demanded social opportunities for students and the calendar particularly around Christmas but have to be squeezed into an intensive and demanding fifteen week period.

> *In the last cycle that I was working on it was a fifteen week cycle and it straddled Christmas, the two week Christmas break and my students desperately wanted to do things out there in the community. So they asked me would I organise something. So we had a day in Kiama at the weekend. They really want to do more things like that but the time restrictions don't allow them to do that. So at Christmas we had a bit of free time. They really do want to get out there and see things and experience things but there's no time.*

Although they had experienced uncertainty in their employment conditions and intensification of their work lives teachers spoke of a sense of achievement at the end of courses and a sense of camaraderie that energised their work:

> *I feel terrific at the end of an ETS course ...when you have been through this experience with this group of people and you have all worked very hard together for two or three months and you do get something that is really quite special at the end. I mean it is really sad because we have forgotten most of their names. But there is a sense of "we have been through something together and wasn't it good".*

The importance of the social aspects of their work was also highlighted when courses finished as a way of celebrating the achievements of students. However the teachers suggested that this role was very important and the opportunities for this to assist student achieve better outcomes with the spoken English but had been neglected

> *At the end of the course we have a token barbecue or we take them on an excursion but it is very, very limited. But in the General English course there are attempts to have quite a few excursions but again they are basically amongst themselves. There has been talk in the past of inviting other mainstream students here or setting up debates or doing social activities or maybe some work experience programs or volunteering out in the general community.*

Teachers confessed that while they saw the value of the social interactions, the expectations that they would undertake these in an environment in which they experienced uncertainty over their own employment and in intensified courses were high. All the teachers saw the value of extra curricular activities. They experienced dilemmas in responding to this need as they were already overloaded. The teachers saw that the organization was seeking to remedy this.

> *Student welfare and student socialisation is one of the areas that the College is trying to work on at the moment. We don't know what the answers are but we just know that we have to do more to get them out there in the community.*

The importance of someone to negotiate interactions with the Australian community was reinforced by the teachers experiences with students who had seen the benefits to students who had been able to establish social networks and felt that for those that experienced difficulties there was a need for this to be done by in a more systematic structured way that had been experienced. One teacher spoke of their experience of one successful student:

> *I was approached by one of my former students last year who had just got back from Christmas in Thailand and she said she had actually joined up with some University class. She had been studying for six months and now she said she had the confidence and she had just gone along and joined up at the tennis club and some other club and I thought that was fantastic. But we need someone. If universities could have someone like that or English colleges attached to Universities could have someone like that, even part-time would be good.*

The teachers recognised the barriers to establishing communication between international students and Australian students but pointed to several successes that they had observed and experienced. One teacher recalled a case where a more confident African student had taken up the challenge to establish contact with the Australian students.

> *But then I saw one student who was from Africa and she had very good English as well and she went over and she started the communication with the Australian students. She broke the cycle of "us and them" just by asking a question about what they do on the weekend. And then they started to involve her and then she involved some of the Asian students. The Asians found it very difficult to engage in conversation.*

Many teachers observed how the environment of the classroom featured a diverse range of political and social perspectives that characterised the Asia Pacific. The classroom provided a place where many of the potential sources of tension and division were often diffused by the goodwill that occurred in the classroom

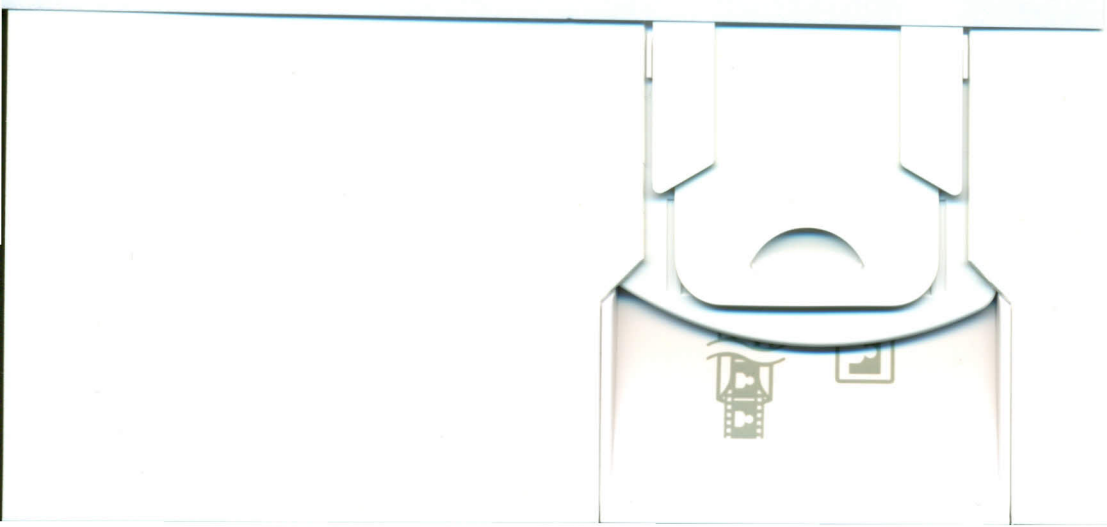
> *I spoke to one of my students about that issue this week because half my class at the moment are Chinese and half are Thai and there's one from Taiwan. And I said to one of the Chinese "what is the relationship between you and the Taiwanese" and he said "it's fine, we're good friends we just don't discuss politics, it's a no, no, we don't discuss it at all".*

In this way the language classroom of the 21st century appears to be a place intercultural negotiations of the diversity across the region are manifested in complex ways.

Conclusion

The nature of teachers' work and language teaching in the global university is characterised by a number of contradictions that are a direct consequence of the intensified market in English language teaching. The English language teaching industry features a competitive trans- national market in which university bridging programs are a major provider giving students access to university programs. The principle objective of students according to teachers is the achievement of entry requirements for English related to a selected study option. There is an instrumental quality associated with language teaching that is directly related to both the dynamics of the market and the objectives of the students to qualify for entry into the academy. These dynamics of the market limit the nature and scope of language to a more discipline based or vocational teaching of language directed to fulling the needs of the academy. This reduces the opportunities to develop a communicative approach that responds to some of the social and cultural aspects associated with life as a student in Australia. In the opinion of some teachers this also confined the opportunities for students to gain a broader understanding of the English language. Indeed teachers identified a contradiction that many of the students had learned English though text based means and that further academic English did not directly respond to the need for the students to develop the spoken and listening skills that they saw as essential for living in Australia as a student.

The teachers identified the importance of weighing up the competing demands of wanting students to achieve particular educational goals but also the need for students to have some exposure to the community. While aural and oral language needs could be simulated in the language labs, they lacked authenticity and the usage being voluntary was seen as patchy. They recognised the place for recreational and community based English but for an already overcrowded program structure, such programs added onto existing programs in a cost sensitive and highly competitive industry are often difficult to sustain. However the need for authentic local experiences and exposure to Australian English was seen as an important feature in boosting confidence in dealing with the cultural challenges



for students living in Australia. Excursions and other recreational activities were seen as key features in an ideal program to assist student negotiate the intercultural aspects of Australian life.

The need for such programs was seen as particularly important in responding to the diversity of students that typified the contemporary student body. Not only was there an increasing diversity of countries such as China, Thailand, Indonesia, Korean, Japan and Taiwan where most of the population are not exposed to English but the diversity of age ranges was an additional challenge. Students as young as 15 years were now enrolled in programs and this placed a greater importance on the support services and welfare services in supporting teachers. Many teachers, while they recognised the need for such extracurricular support and counselling within the work of the College, found it difficult to meet this demand themselves in an already intensified work schedule.

Teachers spoke of the contradictions of uncertainty and intensity in their work as the cycles of work determined by the markets were hard to predict. Teachers, who were on short term contracts, found themselves often moving from course to course with short timelines for preparation and familiarisation. They spoke of the intense engagement during the ten-week period in some courses and sense of camaraderie and achievement that both teachers and students had at a successful completion. The troughs and down time experienced by many teachers was clearly a problem in establishing a career in the area but in general the continued demand for the programs ensured a regular source of work and the College co-ordinators were seen to be sympathetic to the teachers and attempted to spread work around and maintain a network of regulars to ensure that high demand periods were adequately staffed. Nevertheless the patterns of employment and the nature of the market suggest that such organizations are trapped in a "just in time mode" of operations with the difficulties associated with capacity building being a problem. The inability to give guarantees of regular work as well as the presence of predatory competitors suggest stable staffing is a priority for such organizations but a difficult outcome to achieve.

The teachers spoke highly of the commitment and abilities of their students and recognised the difficulties that learning language in the intensified mode produced. Fatigue and frustration were seen as some of the outcomes of the programs for students. Yet the teachers recognised that students demonstrated willingness and a determination to do the hard work that was necessary to achieve success. They also challenged perception that students were unwilling to tackle oral work and to think critically and cited instances where students had undertaken successful presentations and group work. Teachers suggested that one of the tasks they saw as critical was to develop a shift from dependence on the teacher to an independent mode of learning. This transition was seen as a vital part of "enculturating" Asian

students into an Australian environment where the self-directed learning is an essential part of the student experience. The use of critical literacy and many of the discussion sessions were seen as foundations for this transition.

Even though teachers expressed confidence in many of their students' development and satisfaction that the programs provided the basis for success in the mainstream, university teachers also expressed less certainty about the capacities of lecturers to respond to the language needs of students. They recognised that discipline specialists could not be expected to be language experts and in many ways the teachers compensated for this through such strategies as not speaking slowly to ensure students were attuned to the type of delivery that students would experience in the academy. Some level of overlap between the College and the university was suggested but the mechanics of formalising this seemed to be a difficulty that needed further work.

The intensified and programmed nature of the intensive language programs suggests a one-way situation where Asian students unfamiliar with English are passive and anonymous learners unable to establish a dialogue with Australians. On the contrary, the impression from teachers and students, suggests that the language programs are occupying a role as an excellent forum in which intercultural, social and political discourses on Asia and Australia can be mediated. These programs provide a forum for exploration on the nature and character of Australia and its relationships to the Asia Pacific for potential students. While the goals of such programs have an instrumental and reductionist quality there is also an aspect to these programs that sees a meaningful intercultural dialogue established when teaching features a communicative focus, a commitment to self directed learning and curriculum that features a critical and analytical focus.

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Adult Learners in Higher Education: Learner Engagement and Literacy-related Issues

Sarjit Kaur

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore learner engagement and literacy-related issues among adult learners in a higher education context in a public university in Malaysia. 25 final year students in the B.A. English Language and Literature Studies (ELLS) programme in Universiti Sains Malaysia provide insightful comments on their learning experiences and literacy-related issues affecting their academic journey. Based on student responses in focus group interviews and students' journal entries, the paper examines the life stories of these adult learners and their views on learner engagement and literacy. This localized approach aims to provide literacy educators with a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding adult learners' learning experiences.

Introduction

"I consider myself very fortunate to be able to pursue my university education after all these years. Being brought up in a traditional Chinese family, it was drilled into my head by my father that educational opportunities among us siblings is first and foremost reserved for the males. My father sponsored my younger brothers' education and I was advised to marry and settle down. After teaching for 10 years, I finally applied to study for a degree course at university. Being at university has taught me to appreciate many things. I feel that this opportunity has opened many avenues for self improvement for me" [Chinese female, 43 years old]

"When I first came to university, I was assailed by many fears and anxieties and I felt inadequate among young students who came straight from Form 6. I must say that now I have learned a lot in my academic journey at university. Being able to comprehend academic articles, improving my English proficiency, writing a good assignment, expressing my ideas well during tutorials, doing project work with my peers; really all these skills are the reasons why I enjoyed my tertiary experience so much" [Malay male, 35 years old]

"I always thought there was one answer available to every question but being at university has opened my mind to the view that there are so many ways to interpret

a theory or model of learning. It has also been an enlightening experience to work in groups on various projects. Initially I assumed that things around me had a linear relationship but now I feel I have grown intellectually and I feel more equipped to handle and solve problems in my teaching life" [Indian female, 31 years old]

These excerpts were written by adult students who were pursuing university education on a full-time basis after having taught in primary schools for a period of between 6-19 years. What evidence of literacy, generic skills and life stories can be found in their comments? How can their experiences shape literacy learning in higher education? The issues of understanding adult learners' experiences and their literate behaviours have been contentious in many adult education circles in Malaysia (and in the Asia Pacific region) for many years. In the Malaysian education system, the purpose of students attending higher education institutions in order to pursue degree programmes in various academic disciplines is clearly to prepare the younger generation for further economic and technological development in Vision 2020 (Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1990). Educationists in Malaysia share these views as they see increased educational opportunities in the sphere of lifelong learning as a behavioural manifestation of man that communities, societies and nations should inculcate in their populace (Bajunid & Said, 2002; Lowe, 2002).

In recent years, the issues surrounding what counts as being literate among adult students in tertiary settings have undergone much change. The dawn of the third millennium has brought significant changes in every professional environment, including the field of education. Today, this contemporary and globalised information revolution (assisted by rapid developments in educational technology) has opened an entire network of information retrieval possibilities to instructors and students in various educational contexts. Some of these IT-related advances include the use of multimedia, the internet, computer conferences, list serves, relational databases and many other innovative technology-related inventions. Under such circumstances, knowledge gained yesterday is no longer sufficient to equip an individual's literacy needs for a lifetime. For the most part of the last century, adults in Malaysia were considered literate if they had completed their Form 3 or Form 5 education and could read and write in English or Bahasa Melayu. However, these definitions do not work in today's complex and globalised world.

Beck's (2000) conceptual disruption of the globalization discourse provides most educators with a useful starting process. Here, he makes a distinction between globalism (manner in which globalization has become an ideology), globality (refers to world society) and globalization (denotes a processes through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying degrees of power, orientations, identities and networks) (Kenway,

Bullen & Robb, 2003). Indeed, scholars have increasingly pointed out to the contextual nature of literacy; they contend that what it means to be literate depends to a large extent on the situation in which an adult learner operates. The following examples illustrate several instances:

> Literacy is not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances but the ability to participate fully in a set of social and intellectual practices. (White, 1983:56)

> Literacy is not just the simple ability to read and write...by possessing and performing these skills we exercise socially approved and approvable talents. (Cook-Gumperz, 1986:1)

> [Functional literacy is the] possession of, or access to, the competencies and information required to accomplish transactions entailing reading and writing [in] which an individual wishes – or is compelled – to engage. (Kintgen, Kroll & Rose, 1988:263)

Education authorities have adopted these context-bound views of literacy. Many similar definitions of literacy have been purported by other experts and it is interesting to note that most of them make good common sense. How do these definitions frame literacy thinking among adult learners in higher education? To what extent do university teachers have to understand these students' needs and experiences when planning instructional activities that stress on learner engagement in an effort to promote meaning making? However, is it possible perhaps that most of these definitions of literacy focus too much on skill to the exclusion of will? That is, literate adult learners not only know how to read and write and display literate behaviour in academic settings but also choose to acquire literate skills to enable them to do well academically. Most definitions of *engaged learners*, developed by National Literacy Research centres worldwide describe fluent, adult readers as having the desire to read and use literacy (*motivation*); the skills and abilities that allow readers to recognize print, understand it, and interact with it (*strategies*); information about reading and how to obtain ideas from the written word (*knowledge*); and the ability to learn from and with others while using reading skills and abilities (*social interaction*) (Baumann & Duffy, 1997).

This study with adult learners in a higher education context is based on this comprehensive definition, which embraces literacy abilities and literacy choices and attitudes. In this article, I develop the rationale for this approach in adult education contexts and describe how adult learners express their views about their life experiences, learner engagement and literacy-related issues. These student insights will direct adult educators to offer students opportunities to become engaged readers and writers in an academic context.

Life Stories of Adult Students in a University Setting

Adult students come from varied family backgrounds and most have interesting life experiences that help shape the manner in which they display literate behaviours in academic settings. It is evident that most adult students have clearly defined roles when they pursue higher education after having worked for several years. Many too have had to juggle numerous role responsibilities (domestic, financial, work-related and others) in addition to their role of being full-time students in a university setting. This study involved 25 full-time adult students in a public university (mostly primary school teachers) who volunteered to keep journals for their final semester of their degree programme. These participants were students in the English Language and Literature Studies (ELLS) degree programme at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia during the Semester 1, 2002/03 academic session. For the entire 15 weeks of the semester, they wrote journal entries about their background stories, their views about their academic experiences and issues relating to literacy. The participants comprise 10 males and 15 female final year students. The participants also took part in focus group interviews (five students in each group) conducted by the researcher.

Based on their written responses, it seems apparent that nine of the adult students had to struggle against many odds to achieve their dream of pursuing a university education. Some of the interesting themes raised by these adult students related to social injustice, rigid family upbringing and lack of opportunity. The following excerpts illustrate this:

"My home environment was very structured. Coming from a rigid patriarchal family, I was indoctrinated into believing that education is not important for girls, as we would end up in the kitchen. My father threatened to stop my education but I insisted to continue under the condition that I would not neglect my household chores. Since my family was poor and we lived in a rural area and being the eldest in a family of seven children, I had to attend to the toddlers. I had to toil daily to carry out the household chores. If I was caught reading a book, I was reprimanded for neglecting my chores. Even during my teacher training days in college, I had to contribute my meager allowance to support my family financially. I was told that a girl must practise self-denial and self-sacrifices for the family. When my father became financially stable, he sent my three brothers overseas to further their studies. I felt the injustices of sexual discrimination when my brothers inherited substantial sums of money from my father and the girls did not get any money. That's why I broke out from this socio-cultural environment and I decided to apply for university admission to fulfill my goal of furthering my tertiary education. I also wish to serve as a worthy role model to my daughters" [Chinese female, 46 years old]

In the above excerpt, it can be seen that this adult student had to overcome numerous obstacles existent within the structure of her home environment before she could pursue her university education. During the focus group interview, a few other students raised the theme of gender inequality that existed in several traditional Chinese families and they discussed the unfair treatment awarded by their patriarchal families in only advocating educational opportunities to the male members of the family. However, most of the female Chinese students accepted that this did happen to them but that they were willing to make such sacrifices so as not to "upset my old-fashioned parents" [Chinese female, 42 years old, Focus Group Interview].

The following excerpts are taken from students' journal entries:

"I have been applying to pursue my university degree for the past 5 years but each time I apply, my school headmaster says he can't afford to let me go. It has been very frustrating for me but I was really pleased that my persistence paid off. I've had to struggle with my family life and it hasn't been easy for me as my husband is an insurance salesman and often travels outstation, leaving me by myself to manage my three school-going children. I am proud though of my motivation to do well in my studies and this is a good life skill for me. My mother-in-law, being traditional in her thinking, is not happy that I'm attending university but luckily my husband supports me in this." [Indian female, 35 years old]

"Since my childhood days, I have only been exposed to the Malay language: at home and at school. It never crossed my mind that one day I would be majoring in English Studies at university. I began to enjoy learning English at school when I was in Form 4 as I had a very dedicated teacher who made me enjoy English as a subject. Through her, I began to read more English books, watch English programmes on TV and communicate more in English with my classmates. My main reason to obtain a university degree is my motivation to show my parents and my in-laws that I have been able to fulfil my life goal of becoming a trained English language teacher and to disprove their belief that Malays cannot speak English well. Since I am a Malay who lives among Malay people, I now realize that my community does respect Malay individuals who can communicate well in English as long as the person remains humble and stays true to cultural values that have been passed down our generation. I realize that my 3 children and my husband are the motivating factors that make me do well in my course. My husband has been helpful in looking after our kids while I'm attending university full-time. We have had to make many sacrifices but I think these sacrifices have brought us closer". [Malay female, 32 years old]

"I came to university after teaching for 16 years in primary schools. I'm the third child in a family of seven. My father is a farmer and my mother is a full-time housewife. They were very pleased with my entrance to university as they

consider me a 'late bloomer'. Although I was accepted after my second application, I'm grateful as some of my colleagues have not been so fortunate. With a university degree, I stand a better chance of being promoted to the post of a Senior Assistant or a headmistress for a Grade B school. Being a student again has made me realize that I can now become a better English or ESL teacher when I return to East Malaysia as most of my students' mother tongue is Melanau, their second language is Malay and their third language is English. My university experience has equipped me with more teaching strategies that I can use with my students". [East Malaysian Melanau female, 33 years old]

"I taught for16 years prior to my enrolment in USM. Initially I created a psychological barrier within myself, which was detrimental to my academic performance as I didn't feel comfortable being among young students in my course. My age also posed some problems as I couldn't remember facts easily, I went blank at times during exams or semester tests, I had a low self-esteem for some courses and I had fears that I might not graduate with my peers. I have always been able to do well in my coursework requirements as I enjoyed doing course assignments and was capable in expressing my thoughts during tutorials. My main problem was I kept being assailed by my negative thoughts and I began to envy my peers who seemed to handle pressure better". [Chinese male, 41 years old]

From the above journal extracts, it can be seen that many adult students overcame the obstacles that were in their way to pursue their university education after having worked as primary school teachers for several years. During the focus group interviews, the emergent theme of being determined to overcome life's obstacles was discussed very openly and candidly by most of the adult students. Clearly the motivation to enrol for a full-time university course was the main factor in helping the adult students to overcome various obstacles in their lives. Most of them consider the value of a university education to be an important factor in helping them perceive themselves more positively and some of the students value the importance of being good role models for their children and also for their future students.

Engaged Learners

Very frequently adult education contexts seem based on the assumption that, if learners work hard on taught academic skills and conventions, they will have 'acquired' the necessary literacy skills for success in academic life. However, the opposite is more often the case within adult education contexts. Adult students need to be instructed in matters pertaining to acquiring academic literacies as most of these students come from varied work backgrounds and thus look forward

to instructional activities that aid them in acquiring specific academic skills. In discussing the instructional paradigms that are traditionally used in institutions of higher learning, the term "literacies" is more appropriate as it helps to move the debate forward beyond the single set of basic skills required to declare oneself to be functionally literate. In today's higher education contexts, learners have to equip themselves with various abilities and skills so that they can negotiate the way they make meanings (Kaur, 2001; 2005). For the adult student in higher education, campus life is a new experience and involves a whole range of registers and discourse practices that affect the way/s the student negotiates meaning in an academic context.

Higher education educators should realize that learning has most impact when it requires active engagement from the learners or when it is realistically linked to adult students' working experiences. In other words, the instructional activities should make connections with what exists beyond the classroom. In this sense, any instructional activities which employ authentic reading and writing tasks will help promote motivated and engaged learners. Indeed, early proponents of learning considered interest to be of primary importance to learning (Dewey, 1913; James, 1950). In recent years, more scholars are in agreement with the idea that, when students have both interest in what is being taught and access to interesting academic materials, learning, motivation, effort and attitudes will improve (Knowles, 1984; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). More recently, other studies have shown that authentic instruction led to more positive changes in adults' literacy practices outside the classroom (Kaur, 2003; Padak & Bardine, 2004).

Many teachers in higher education commonly view teaching as a transmission of knowledge of authoritative content or the demonstration of procedures. Entwistle (1998) advocates a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between teaching and learning and states that the guiding principle is that learning outcomes depend on the interaction between the characteristics of the student, the teaching style and the methods of the teacher and practices of the department and institution. Entwistle's (ibid) stance is that of liberal humanism and it is deeply rooted in a view of education as a partnership rather than as an authoritarian transmission of information from the expert to the ignorant. Knowles (1984) too advocates a similar inclination towards the humanistic paradigm, which rests on the felt-needs rationale in meeting adult learners' felt needs. This means that in discussions concerning literacy practices of students, educators must take into account the "interactions that continuously occur between learners and the settings when they engage in cognitive activities" (Darvin, 2006:398). The following excerpts highlight some of felt needs expressed by adult learners in this case study:

"To me being immersed in my courses is what engagement is all about. Some course assignments are very straightforward and don't require us to connect

with our lives as teachers or students. Many of my friends won't complain as these assignments are relatively easy. I like challenges so I've enjoyed assignments or projects that allow us to conduct small-scale research studies in schools or organizations. I like this bridging aspect of my learning but unfortunately very few courses had such requirements. Most of my learning has been rigidly based on the course so my suggestion for lecturers would be to get us more connected with the realities of language learning theories or models in second language Malaysian classrooms" [Chinese female, 42 years old]

This issue was also discussed during the focus group sessions. Most adult students felt that the idea of being involved in a meaningful way in their academic tasks was something they valued and in this sense, they appreciated lecturers who provided them with learning projects that allowed them to link theories with practice. Some of the students lamented that in some courses, most of the assignments were too "theory-based and did not provide avenues for me to learn anything of significance" [Chinese male, 39 years old, Focus Group Interview]. In other focus group sessions, the students discussed that they enjoyed being involved in group projects.

The following excerpts are from students' journal entries:

"Most coursework requirements for my degree programme have been tests and assignments and I've always struggled to do my assignments. I don't like group assignments as some group members are lazy and I end up doing most of the work; many lecturers don't realize this and we feel upset that our group members share the good grade without putting in the effort. I've enjoyed some courses where the lecturer holds discussions and gets us to air our views critically; these tutorials are challenging as I enjoy expressing my views but some of my colleagues hate this (probably because their English proficiency is not as good as mine). I also like individual presentations as we get to discuss our contributions in front of the class, using various visual aids; as the preparation of these aids require us to show our computer literacy skills" [Indian female, 36 years old]

"For me, being from a Chinese-medium school, doing many assignments has been difficult especially for Literature courses. I'm always conscious of my English when compared to my Indian friends who speak so well. This has always made me shy, timid and anxious during tutorial presentations and I've never got high marks. I seem to do better in my final exam though and my grades have been good. I like group projects but not many lecturers allow us to do project work assignments" [Chinese female, 28 years old]

During the focus group interviews, several adult students echoed similar opinions in relation to their English language proficiency and group-based assignments.

About 40% of the students stated that they preferred individual assignments for their Literature courses as this allowed them to explore ideas more creatively and critically. There were some problems with group assignments but not all were negative comments though: some reasons cited was the difficulty in getting all group members to meet at appropriate times which did not clash with their domestic duties, distance from campus or not having a home computer. However, most adult students felt that group projects did have several benefits as it helped them to get to know each other better, promoted better goodwill and good teamwork and helped them to enhance their problem-solving or analytical skills.

Student's Views on Literacy

In the same way that adult learners discuss their life stories and learner engagement strategies, they also candidly wrote about their views relating to academic literacies in higher education. It is important for educators to look at the unique problems associated with adult students so that we can promote learning that helps all our students evolve into productive world citizens (Taylor, 2005). I believe that there is much that literacy educators in higher education can do to improve literacy-related issues for the students we are entrusted to teach. It is good for educators to reflect on our practice to question whether we always remember to be sensitive to the individual learning pace of each adult student, as well as the student's learning style. We might then seek to employ innovative teaching strategies that build on these students' current interests in ways that are sensitive to their individual development and emotional needs. The following excerpts serve to highlight some of the adult students' writings about literacy-related issues in their academic journey:

"Most of my lecturers are good but I believe some of them assume that we know everything related to being literate academically. In my first year, I had to acquire and learn the art of comprehending research or journal articles by myself. It wasn't easy as my lecturers just make the assumption that mature learners can read well! It would have been nice if we were shown how to compartmentalize the various sections of a journal article etc. I wasn't computer-literate when I came into uni. I had to learn computing skills in my own spare time as all assignments had to be done using Microsoft Word. My view of being literate now is that an individual needs to keep abreast of all changes around our environment and to be willing to keep an open mind to learning new things that will help us become better persons or better teachers" [Chinese male, 38 years old]

"What is literacy? To me it's a process of becoming an all-rounded person who's not afraid of learning new things. It's also a process of becoming more articulate in expressing one's views in reading or writing. Being literate in reading and

writing is an essential part of being a functional university student. In my tertiary experience, I've had to handle various challenges (academic, personal, social) and I'd like to see lecturers helping us out more on this sphere though—they need to give us assignments or projects too to help us connect with the real world". [Indian male, 31 years old]

The above views on literacy were also echoed by other adult students during the focus group sessions. While most adult students are able to extrapolate on such issues, there were a few students who faced some difficulty in expressing their ideas on what counted as being 'literate' but they got the idea in the course of the group session when they listened to their course-mates discussing their views on literacy. During the focus group interview, one student highlighted the idea of literacy of being "reflective, that is I need to understand what I learn so I can apply it to my concrete situation in the classroom". [Indian female, 30 years old, Focus Group Session].

The following excerpts were gleaned from students' journal entries:

"Some of my lecturers really touched my heart and to me being able to touch the hearts of students by helping them cope with their understanding of the subject is what the business of teaching is all about! So, to me a lecturer who can guide us towards this path has my vote as this instructor shows sensitivity and empathy of students' situation. Yes, I've acquired many general literacy skills – I learned about time management, working in a team for projects (picked up literate behaviours of understanding cultural literacy), appreciated assignments that had us employ problem-solving skills etc. Most of all, I now value good literate behaviours of my students in class and I feel more equipped to identify various literate behaviours". [Chinese female,33 years old]

"Before I came to university, my view of literacy was that of being able to read, write and do arithmetic. But being involved in studies at university has made me realize that literacy has to be thought of being in the plural [literacies] as there are not only many types of literacies, there are also many types of literate behaviours exhibited by people around us – my peers, lecturers, university support staff, lab technicians, and others. I'd like to think that as a mature student, I'm leaving university equipped with skills and strategies that can help me become a better educator; that's what being literate professionally means to me. Now I feel energized as I feel I can develop better teaching strategies and bring in new activities for my future learners". [Malay female, 34 years old]

These excerpts from students' journals show that in the landscape of their academic journey, adult students also experienced new challenges and that

these challenges have prepared them, to some extent, to think about expanding their teaching styles. Their views on literacy seems to incorporate broad definitions of the term, to include activities and topics that they will use to teach their students when they return to teaching after graduating from university.

In one of the focus group sessions, the adult students discussed their teaching experiences and used some successful lessons to explain how they perceive literacy education. An adult student teaching a Primary 3 classroom explained how she used authentic materials to help promote interest in reading among her students: *"I used to ask my students to do comprehension questions from the prescribed textbook and workbook but I felt they were disengaged when they merely answered comprehension questions. Then when I used authentic texts, or read new stories to them or got them to do role plays etc, they became more engaged in learning"* [Malay female, 35 years old, Focus Group Session]. This adult student said she understood that 'literacy' as a concept needs to incorporate and tap into numerous skills and abilities of students to make their learning more engaging and fun. In other focus group sessions, the adult students discussed their views of literacy as being a collection of activities and skills that allowed them to incorporate knowledge from various sources in a comprehensive manner. Generally, most of the adult students' notion of literacy is plural and this concurs with many literacy experts who are of the view that it expands from the psychological to include the sociocultural and finds that what constitutes being literate depends upon the demands of time and locale (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Heydon, Hibbert & Iannacci, 2005).

Conclusion

As literacy educators, we must listen to our students' views so that we can discover better ways of empowering our students. This paper set out to examine some implications of adult students' views on literacy, learner engagement and their life stories so that literacy educators can learn from these insights. The journals kept by the adult students provided a place for their private reflection on many literacy-related issues; students did not feel compelled to share their views with others and it provided them with a platform to reflect assumptions about optimal adult learning situations.

What seems apparent is that these adult students' views obviously pose some challenges to literacy educators in the higher education sector. What these excerpts can do is possibly highlight to educators the fact that adult students' course experiences may have become too narrowly defined by university authorities, by the metanarratives of marketing and accountability concerns. Adult students

need to given special consideration as they are a significant force, a new breed of learners in higher education institutions in Malaysia. To help guide adult students to cope with the literacy demands of higher education, we need to help them deconstruct their own knowledge, beliefs and practices as well as those that surround them. One way is to provide open channels of communication between students and educators so that their learning needs are not marginalized in higher learning. By looking at localized contexts, literacy educators can be challenged to take heed of adult learners' views about learning so that they can then plan learning objectives that answer to adult learners' views and felt needs relating to literacy-related teaching and learning issues.

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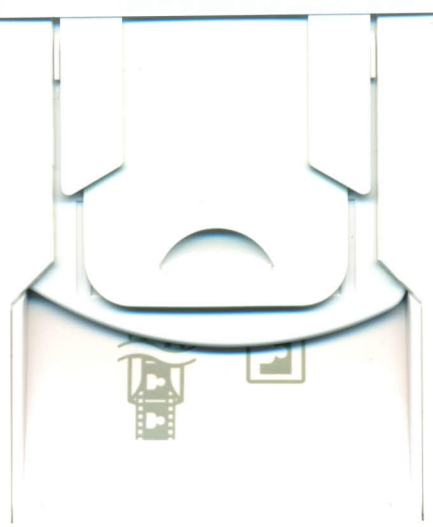

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THE INTERNET MILIEU: INDIVIDUALISATION WITHIN A GLOBALISED COMMUNITY

Lee Siew Chin and Lin Luck Kee

Abstract

Communication technologies have become deeply embedded in our lives, mediating the ways in which information is presented. Due to the global nature of this channel of communication, the world has shrunk and members of the internet may share similar cultural norms of thinking and behaving. Yet, paradoxically, the Internet is personal in that each individual has an interactive opportunity in choosing the options that can expand the breadth and depth of the information they are reading, who they interact with, and the means to achieve that interaction. These options can be expressed through a variety of media techniques. This paper is based on a study of selected websites hosted in English. It looks at language use in the Internet and illustrates the paradoxes between global and individual mediations of meaning.

Globalisation and the Internet

Globalisation as a phenomenon is not new; but in the last two decades it has become a much discussed issue. People have become increasingly linked to each other as a result of advanced developments in technologies. Communication is multidimensional and goes in tandem with increasing transnational movement of goods and services, and of people. It has resulted in a rapid turnover of ideas, of images, and of ways and behaviours (Randeria, 1998 in Tetzlaff, 1998).

One of the facets of globalisation is de-borderization and de-spatialization on one hand; and qualities of compaction and interlinkage on the other (Tetzlaff, 1998). Since the 1980s advances in digitised technologies starting with the computer has enabled speedy dissemination of information, making it a totally interconnected marketplace that is unhampered by time zones or national boundaries. The very nature of increasing interdependence and interaction between people in disparate locations has eroded the primacy of the nation-state, blurring socio-political and economic boundaries creating a global village so to

speak. Borderlessness has transported the venues of interaction into a spatial venue beyond geographic sites into a state of being where everyone is linked through digitised mediums, the Internet being one of them.

Through the Internet, there is a flow of ideas, information, values and knowledges. As a result, there is an expansionist impact seen in the pervading adoption of a set of universal values and ways of being, as exemplified in the way people browse and surf the Internet. However, digitised communication by nature and limitations in terms of the capacity of the hardware and its accompanying software also tend to dictate the ways in which information can be accessed. The protocols of access then shape how the information is presented. This has shaped the discourse in the Internet through the ways of usage; an example is the way texts in websites are organised and presented. Since the presentation in websites are bound by the nature of the software that enables information to be hosted on the Internet, there would be some common approach towards accessing web-based texts. This means that everyone who uses the Internet only needs to click the 'search' icon – implying a sameness in behavioural patterns. Thus, we may argue that similar ways of behaviours mean universality, would equate to an environment that encourages the deletion of individualisation, resulting in a faceless, nameless mass. This paper argues that because the ways of access are universal, and standardised, it does not necessarily mean that the user has lost his/her individuality in the Internet. It aims to illustrate that although websites perpetuate a way of being that is communal and global in terms of a common set of navigational and browsing strategies; yet each user is individualised. It explores how these strategies are staged linguistically and semiotically in selected websites in the Internet.

The Internet as a New Media

In recent years, a new type of media output has emerged; one that is enabled through digitised technology. This domain encompasses computer-mediated communication (CMC) and digitised telecommunications with computers and cell phones being the hardware that enables the media messages to be relayed and displayed. In the case of computer assisted information output, there are five internet-using situations containing languages of their own that are significantly distinctive, viz e-mails, chat groups – synchronous and asynchronous, virtual worlds, and worldwide webs (Crystal, 2001). These outputs are distinctive in terms of the function or use of these texts, and thereby, shape the forms of the texts. Since these texts are bounded by their specific goals, they can be typed as sub-genres within the computer mediated texts (see Table 1).

million or 76.3% primary pupils in national schools (5,789), 620,000 in Chinese schools and more than 80,000 in Tamil schools are multilingually literate in Bahasa Melayu, English, and Mandarin or Tamil . These statistics however do not provide a cross-national survey of literacy amongst the country's population that takes into account the varied stages of development in literacy, the multitude of linguistic and multi-cultural contexts, and the changing priorities for education policies.

Thus, to avoid misrepresentations of literacy rates and practices at the macro level, it is necessary to be cognizant of the vernacular literacies that the communities practise, and investigate the literacy practices that they are already engaged in by viewing literacy as a situated and variable social process. The following section provides insights into the issue of English literacy in Malaysia derived from research in the ethnographic paradigm and from the perspective of viewing literacy as a social process.

2. Ethnographic Perspectives of English Literacy in Malaysia

The tradition of English language education in Malaysia has generally been guided by what is generally considered to be 'state of the art' or 'progressive' ways of approaching learning and teaching the second language by national education developers and native-speaker Western educators. These apparently 'effective methods' or ways of language learning and teaching are simply and generally imposed and are then expected to be successful in the prevailing varying contexts of learning. This approach characterizes the autonomous model of literacy, which perceives literacy as a unitary skill and as context free, without acknowledging the role of other literacies. It ignores the value of vernacular literacy experiences, knowledge, and attitudes of the learners shaped by their mother tongue environments (Hazita Azman, 1999; Gee, 1990; Luke, 1988).

An ethnographic paradigm allows us to 'see' and locate meanings and uses of literacy practices in particular from local perspectives. Being informed of these local conceptions is vital for literacy programme developers and implementers, especially in multilingual contexts such as Malaysia. In the tradition of viewing literacy as a social process, it is necessary to have an ethnographic understanding of how English language is viewed by the local communities and to investigate the extent to which they are situated in the lives of these communities. This entails locating, observing and analysing the uses and meanings of English literacy practices in local spaces in terms of its historical, political, economical and social representations. The section below elucidates this phenomenon by first examining the initial historical and colonial archetypal infrastructure that

was instrumental in situating the English language to create the divide between urban and rural Malaysia.

2.1 English Language, the Colonial Legacy and Globalization

The language issue in Malaysia has always been a contentious topic, and no language has aroused more contentious views than the English language. Before Malaysia gained independence, English as a colonial language was given prominence over vernacular languages. And now, in this globalized era, its resurgence over the national language, Bahasa Melayu, has incited protests from Malay nationalists and Chinese educationists in particular. No matter the degree of acceptance, the nation is resigned to the fact that the English language inevitably remains situated in the language repertoire of Malaysians.

English has taken on many faces since taking permanent residence in Malaysia; from that of colonial master to local elite and urbanite , and currently that of global citizen . The architecture for this situation was designed initially for colonial governance, and then turned into aspirations for nation building and now for global competitiveness. These architectural blueprints began as exclusive designs designated for select elites who controlled the administrative machinery in pre-independence, but later made inclusive in post independence to allow for an identifiable shared geo-politico space in the name of nation building. It is amidst these developments that English is institutionalized as a second language in Malaysia, securing its place in the nation's linguistic landscape. Notwithstanding these developments, which gave rise to its eminent presence in the country, English still remains a stranger in rural communities and is yet to be assimilated significantly into their ways of being, interacting and doing literacy.

The following sections provide a critical perspective of the ways English was designed to be valued, located and positioned in pre-independent Malaya, post-independent Malaysia, and Modern Malaysia. They highlight the ideological intent of the governing hand in directing and shaping the construction of infrastructures that in turn impact on the views, values, learning, teaching and practices of English language literacy in particular.

2.1.1. English in Pre-independence Malaya (Pre-1957)

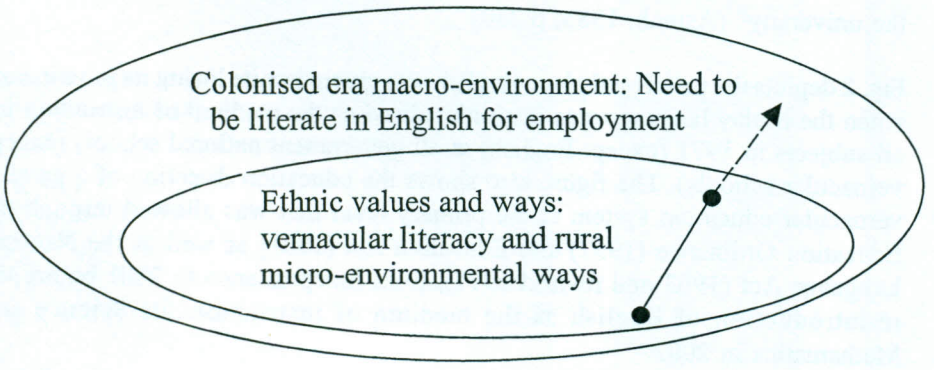
From the perspective of the colonised Malayans during the hey-day of colonialism, the mastery of English meant that natives could be brought closer to the status of their reference group, the white colonials. At the same time, it meant they were advancing along the path of modernity, progress, internationalism and cosmopolitanism (A. Rahman Embong, 2004).

In the pre-independence era , a salient characteristic of English colonization was the colonial master's desire to establish secular education in then Malaya. Education for the natives was divided between English education and the vernacular education systems. The former, most of the time run by missionaries, schooled children of the royal families and affluent non-Malay families, although a very limited number was also allocated for high achievers from the vernacular school system. The English medium schools were found in townships where mainly the local elites, British administration offices and their residential areas are situated.

Meanwhile, the vernacular schools were set up by the colonizers in *kampungs* to teach reading and writing to the peasants so as to produce "more intelligent fisherman or farmers" and to make them understand how they fit into the scheme of life around them (Khoo and Mohd Fadzil, 1980). These schools, located in the rural areas, initiated the dichotomy between rural and urban communities, and between the status of the English language and ethnic vernacular languages.

It soon became apparent that the choice of the medium of instruction created inequality in opportunity whereby the rural child is excluded from participating in the mainstream of the community at large by his inability to read and write in English. This dichotomous situation depicted in Fig 1. sets the tone for the social future of the rural child in terms of English language acquisition. Social mobilization was only possible for the rural child if he mastered the English language as depicted by the dotted arrow. Otherwise, he remained confined to his microenvironment (depicted by the solid line) (Hazita Azman, 2005). Thus the natives were made to feel that being illiterate in English was a deficit and placed one in a specified level in the socio-economic strata.

Fig.1



2.1.2. English in Post-independence Malaysia (1957- 2001)

Independence paved the way for Bahasa Melayu, the language of the colonised, to be elevated to the status of the national and official language of the new nation state. It was planned to be the language for nation-building, a medium for knowledge, a tool for scientific and technological advancement, and for economic progress. It is the language for the realisation of the country's nation-building and modernisation dream (A. Rahman Embong, 2004; Mahathir Mohamed, 2003).

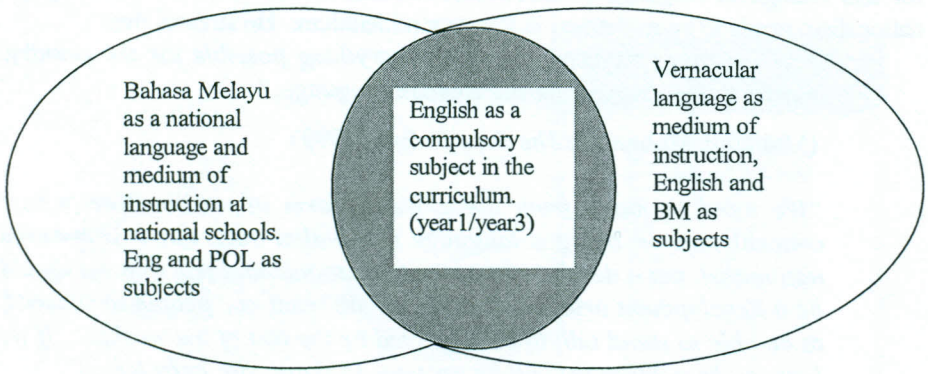
The significant fact about Malaysia then is that at independence 40% of its total population was already made up of Chinese and Indians who remained in their separateness speaking their respective vernacular languages. Thus the independent state was no more the land of the Malays (Tanah Melayu) but a land of plural societies that is multilingual, multicultural, and of course multi-religious. Nevertheless, characterized by such diversity and heterogeneity, the imagined Malaysian society envisaged by the founding fathers would be one united in its diversity through the national language (Bahasa Melayu) and a shared identity (Bangsa Malaysia).

Interestingly, amidst this multilingual background , English did not lose its prominence as it was given the status of a second language after the national language (Bahasa Melayu) and above the other vernacular languages. It even became the language for inter-racial interaction, in early independence, as the local elites become the administrators of the new nation and the ethnic groups remained in their separateness (Asmah, 1983). Meanwhile, English remained separate and elusive to the citizens in the rural areas.

Ideologically, English in the post independence era , although de-emphasized, was still regarded as 'bahasa penjajah' or the colonizers' lingua franca and therefore spiritually resisted. However, the people of the new nation were implored to accept it as "a necessary evil" (Razak Report, 1957), as ironically, it was 'necessary' for the country's economic development. English as a second language in this context "has nothing to do with the acquisition of the language in a temporal context vis a vis a language acquired after the mother tongue, nor does it take into consideration the role it plays as a medium of instruction in the school and the university" (Asmah, 1983; p.230).

Fig. 2 depicts the privileged place English was given despite losing its prominence when the Malay language was institutionalised as the medium of instruction for all subjects in 1971 (except English) at all government national schools (except vernacular schools). The figure also shows the education direction of a parallel vernacular education system at the primary level that was allowed through the Education Ordinance (1957) and Education Act (1961) as well as the National Language Act (1963 and revised 1971), from Independence to 2001 before the re-introduction of English as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics in 2002.

Fig. 2



2.1.3. Modern Malaysia: English in the 21st century

Today, mastery of English signifies the passage to 'competitiveness' of the individual and the nation from the perspective of the market thanks to the spread of neo-liberal globalization powered by technological innovation. The government's decision to reinstitute English as a medium of instruction (MOI) for Science and Mathematics from 2002 predictably brought on fears that the move will lead to a general drop in academic achievement in these subjects which were taught in Bahasa Melayu and Chinese or Tamil languages at national and vernacular schools respectively, for the past 30 years. This concern is profound for students from rural schools.

Education discourses in the knowledge-based era emphatically portray English literacy as instrumental to development, internationalization and globalization. The notion that with English, Malaysia will be progressive and competitive was repeatedly found in the news reports corpus from 2002-2003 to explicate the change in the medium of instruction for Maths and Science. Lexical analysis of these reports (Hazita, 2005; Tan, 2005) revealed personalities representing official voices reiterating definitive roles for English. In nearly 50% of the texts analysed, English is described as ...

"...the language of wider communication"
"...necessary to tap into current knowledge"
"...the lingua franca of business, science, technology and research"
"...help job-seekers become employable"
"...the language of globalization"

(NST, 8 April 2002; Business Times, 23 May 2002; Bernama, 6 July 2002)

At the ideological level, the English revival is viewed as a betrayal to nationalism and the national language. With regard to this sentiment , Tun Mahathir, the man responsible for this change in language of instruction reminds us that the whole concept of nationalism needs to be re-defined in this new millennium. He stresses that:

> *"...True nationalism means doing everything possible for the country, even if it means learning the English language."*
>
> (Mahathir Mohamed, *The Sun*, 11 Sept 1999)

> *"We need to move from the extreme form of nationalism which concentrates on being a language nationalist only, not a knowledge nationalist, not a development oriented nationalist. I feel that we should be a development oriented nationalist. We want our people to succeed, to be able to stand tall, to be respected by the rest of the world. ... If we have no knowledge we will be servants to those with knowledge."*
>
> (Mahathir Mohamed, Interviewed by Gill & Hazita, 16 June 2005)

On these premises, English in the 21st century reclaims its importance in Malaysia as the mandated second language, the prevailing language for the globalized and Digital Age, with the instrumental function of enabling Malaysia to leap frog into the global arena.

The underlying ideological difference in the approach adopted to promote the need for English from that of the colonized (pre-independence) and the national unity era (post-independence) is that the citizens of the nation are encouraged to develop multilingual skills in respecting the inherent diversity of cultures and languages of Malaysian society, whilst giving socio-cultural permission for English to be part of the Malaysian 'linguistic scenery' (a term from Asmah, 1992). In this view, multilingualism including mastery of English is additive rather than subtractive and becomes another principal identity of *Bangsa Malaysia* (the Malaysian citizen). Herein lies the notion that English in Malaysia should then be accepted as another Malaysian language. The Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein had recently strongly suggested that:

> *"English may have been the language of the colonial masters but it was also the language which our founding fathers acquired, took to London, and returned as masters of their own land. Forty-eight years on we should not be shy to say English is a Malaysian language."*
>
> (NST, August 25 2005)

This pronouncement along with other similar statements made in the same vein by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister himself in encouraging especially rural students to learn English more intensively give the all-important official cue for the drive to once again excel in the language.

While the multilingual education system has produced multiliterate Malaysians of the 21st century who are literate to varying degrees of language proficiency and combinations, in Bahasa Melayu, English, Chinese and Tamil, the challenge facing rural communities is the acquisition of proficiency in English literacy as this feature of rural-urban divide remains the bane of rural development . In addition, the rural Malaysian child in the 21st century faces the challenges posed by technological innovations of acquiring literacy from mainly screen based information resources.

Meanwhile the main channel through which English is brought into the rural areas is through the education system. Before 2003, English was confined to classrooms as a subject and students were traditionally taught about the language rather than how to use the language for communication, although the advocated methodology was the integrated approach with elements of communicative language teaching (CLT) principles underpinning it. Rural schools were provided with English textbooks that were " appropriate for limited English proficiency students" (MoE, 1997).

3. Multilingualism and Rural Literacy Practices

Hazita Azman (1999) conducted an ethnographic research on literacy practices in selected rural[1] Malaysia taking into account the varied stages of development in literacy, the multitude of linguistic and multi-cultural contexts, and the changing priorities for education policies. The study provides insights into these varied stages of development in literacy experienced by the multilingual and multicultural communities in rural Malaysia.

The research involved 400 residents of four rural communities most of whom were students, farmers, fishermen, plantation workers, railroad workers, army personnel, government officers, and small business owners. These research participants comprised individuals, aged 10-11 years (n288) and 30-65 years (n112), from 12 schools and 40 families, who were fathers, mothers, children, grandparents and live-in relatives.

To find out the extent of multilingualism among them, the respondents were asked to rank the languages they could "speak, read and/or write well in". The term "well" in this study is defined as being "proficient enough to understand" for reading and "proficient enough to be understood" for speaking and writing (Hazita Azman, 1999). A multilingual, in the broadest definition of multilingualism, is described as anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active or passive communication., while, the terms bilingual and trilingual are used more specifically to describe comparable situations in which two or three languages are involved.

The findings revealed that the 400 research respondents spoke, read and wrote "well" in 38 possible combinations of Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, Tamil and Arabic. Interestingly all ethnic groups reported that they could read and write well in at least three languages as a result of formal education. It is also interesting to note that among the three ethnic groups, the Indians were found to be the most multilingual, while some of the Malays and the Chinese revealed that they were still monolingual. These were found to be older relatives who had not received formal education, with some who claimed to be illiterate. Table 1a shows the most frequent combinations of languages used across ethnic groups in speaking, reading and writing.

Speaking and Multilingualism: The findings revealed that the rural communities spoke Malay, Chinese dialects, Tamil and Indian dialects, and some Arabic. The table below lists the languages the respondents claimed to speak well. Please note that any languages spoken by the Chinese have been categorized as *Chinese language* for practical reasons. Likewise, Tamil and other dialects spoken by the Indian community have been categorized as *Indian language.*

Table 1a: Speaking among rural Malay, Chinese, Indian groups in percentages (ranked)

Language	Ethnicity		
Speak well in:	**Malay***	**Chinese**	**Indian**
Indianl/Malay			85
Malay only	70		
Chinese/Malay		56	
Chinese only		32	
Malay/English	20		
Indian/Malay/English			15
Chinese/Malay/English		12	
Malay/Arabic	10		

It should be noted that the Indians were found to be the most multilingual and claimed to speak more English while a number of the Malays and the Chinese admitted they did not speak any English at all. It is also worth noting that a very small percentage (2%) or 8 Malay respondents had indicated that they can converse in Tamil and Mandarin quite proficiently but not read or write in these languages.

As suggested before, it is not an exaggeration to say that almost all Malaysians are multilingual, that is bilingual or trilingual. Among the three main ethnic groups[2], Malay, Chinese and Indian, literacy surveys have revealed that Indians are the most multilingual while Malays the least. Indians have been found to be able to speak Tamil or an Indian dialect, Malay, and English. Some have even picked up Mandarin. Likewise, the Chinese can speak Mandarin or a Chinese dialect,

Malay, and English. Meanwhile, although a small percentage of Malays have been reported to be able to speak some Chinese dialects and some Tamil or Hindi, the majority are only bilingual in Malay or a Malay dialect and English. The indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak speak their ancestral languages (Dayak etc) as well.

However, being multilingual does not mean that the levels of competency in these languages are balanced and reach the level of native speaker standards. Most Malaysians, for example, when asked to self-rate their language repertoire may report varying degrees of proficiency for each language and even for different language skills. For example, it is common to find the following combination of multilingualism and levels of proficiency among Malaysians:

Scale	Bahasa Melayu	English	Chinese dialect	Indian dialect
Very Proficient	Speak Read			Speak
Proficient	Write			Read
Adequately Proficient		Speak Read		Write
Quite Proficient		Write		
Not at all			*	

Scale	Bahasa Melayu	English	Chinese dialect	Indian dialect
Very Proficient	Speak Read			
Proficient	Write	Speak Read Write		
Adequately Proficient				
Quite Proficient				
Not at all			*	*

Scale	Bahasa Melayu	English	Chinese dialect	Indian dialect
Very Proficient			Speak	
Proficient	Speak Read Write	Speak	Read	
Adequately Proficient		Read	Write	
Quite Proficient		Write		
Not at all				*

This varying degree in proficiency is natural and expected in any multilingual society. However, when the future and potentials of the society and the country greatly depends on the strength of its people to acquire and to apply knowledge

in the language it is communicated in, acquiring the target language and reaching its established standards should be the emphasis that guides its language planning and policy.

Reading, Writing and Multilingual literacy events: Where reading and writing were concerned, , Hazita's study revealed that mainly fathers and children read well and in various languages (Table 1b).

Table 1b: Ability to read among rural Malay, Chinese, Indian groups in percentages (ranked)

Language	Ethnicity		
Read well in:	**Malay***	**Chinese**	**Indian**
Tamil/Malay			32
Malay/English/Arabic	23		
Tamil/Malay/English			21
Malay/Arabic	20		
Mandarin/Malay/English		19	
Malay only	14		
Malay/English	12		
Mandarin only		10	
Malay/Mandarin		6	

In general the data shows that all the ethnic groups read in Bahasa Melayu. The data also shows that while the Indians were more frequent bilingual readers, interestingly, the Malays claimed to read more materials in English. This was mainly because most Malay parents had completed formal education and were employed in the government service while their children engaged in school assignments that required them to read Malay and English materials. Table 1.b.i below depicts the types of reading materials most read by the participants and the languages they are read in.

Table 1.b.i: Types of reading materials most read at home in percentages

Type	Ethnicity			Language			Other
%	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Combination
Newspapers	28	**39**	33	20	**30**	14	14 Mal/Tam **8 Mal/Eng** 5 Mal/Tam/Eng 6 Mal/Mand 3 Mal/Mand/Eng

Type	Ethnicity			Language			Other
%	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Combination
School Books	30	35	**35**	**23**	20	**20**	**15 Mal/Tam/Eng** 15 Mal/Man/Eng 13 Mal/Eng/Arab
Magazines/ comics	**35**	35	31	25	19	16	15 Mal/Tam/Eng 14 Mal/Mand/Eng 8 Mal/Eng **6 Eng only**

Among the three groups, it was found that reading newspapers, especially among the Chinese; reading for school, especially among the Indians; and reading magazines, especially among the Malays ranked as the top three types of reading materials. It was also found that Malays read Malay and English dailies the most, while to a limited extent, reading in English only was practised by children reading comics and newspapers (NIE) for school work. Data from field observations and interviews also revealed that reading at home was a behaviour that was largely related to school literacy events engaging parent and child, or between siblings.

Literacy events involving adults revolved around newspapers and magazines, were usually carried out individually, and occurred in short periods of time (usually not more than 30 minutes). Most often they were engaged in seeking information about current events (usually news and political issues) as well as about public figures (usually entertainment personalities).

Writing practices: The research found that writing activities at home were minimal and mainly related to school and work, and only occasionally for social interaction purposes. Most often the children and the fathers engaged in writing practices at home while most of the mothers who were housewives demonstrated functional literacy practices that were mainly related to housekeeping or childminding. Additionally most mothers disclosed that even when they did oversee their children doing school work, their participation was mainly to discipline (that is to ensure the child finished the homework) rather than to tutor or engage in the school work directly with their children.

Table 1c: Writing among Rural Malay, Chinese, Indian groups in percentages (ranked)

Language	Ethnicity		
Write well in:	**Malay***	**Chinese**	**Indian**
Tamil/Malay/Eng			31
Mandarin/Malay/Eng		21	
Malay/Eng/Arabic	20		
Malay only	19		
Malay/Arabic	8		
Malay/English	7		
Mandarin only		14	

In general, writing at home was largely carried out by the children in the medium of their school subjects, Malay and English and/or Mandarin or Tamil. The Indian and Chinese children reported that they were given a lot of writing practice by their vernacular schools, especially in writing Tamil and Mandarin script respectively. These activities were usually discrete items for intensive practice and did not engage children in extended and expanded literacy activities. This data on literacy practices presented confirms that multilingual literacy is very much a part of the culturally diverse rural Malaysia as it is across the nation and that English language literacy although disconnected from cultural identity is situated in rural communities as school related literacy.

5. School Literacy Practices in Rural Communities

Ethnographic observations of English language teaching in twenty rural primary classrooms at the 12 schools in the study uncovered an assembly of teacher stylized methodologies that included in most parts the use of translation as a teaching strategy (Hazita Azman, 1999). The most common reason given by the 20 English language teachers who were interviewed in explaining their use of translation as a strategy in teaching English was that they found it worked in helping their students to quickly understand meaning as well as how the target language works.

Generally, it was found that teachers used Bahasa Melayu or the vernacular languages during English lessons in most circumstances that involved:

1. giving classroom management instructions
2. describing meaning of words and concepts or ideas
3. explaining grammatical rules and concepts
4. motivating and or consoling students
5. giving instructions on how to carry out tasks or activities.

Another observation was that there were very limited instances in the English classroom when students were engaged in communication for real purposes.

It was also observed that English language teaching typically revolved around reading passages, and related language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing were extensions from the reading activity. Most of the teachers believed that 'reading a lot' would provide students with vocabulary and grammatical input to help them build writing skills. Guided by the belief that reading should precede writing, it was commonly found that the teachers gave less emphasis to writing. Meanwhile, listening and speaking activities were conducted through very limited and contrived dialogue exercises provided in the textbooks (Hazita Azman, 1999).

Another interesting finding was that students in the case studies were seldom given English language assignments to do at home as the teachers had found that most of the students never completed them, using excuses that they did not know how to do so and had no resources at home to assist them.

As reported earlier (Table 1 b-c), students and their family members in the same research study revealed that reading and writing events involving English that did occur at home were very low in frequency and most of the time related to school work. This limited the use of English and its literacy practices in the rural communities to the physical environment of the schools and to school- related work respectively.

According to the integrated Curriculum of Primary School and prior to the use of English as medium of instruction for Maths and Science, primary school students in national schools should receive a total of 210 to 240 minutes (4 hours) of English per week, while children at vernacular schools receive only 90 minutes (1.5 hours) per week and only after primary three (at 9 years of age). It can thus be assumed that the rural child only receives this amount or fewer contact hours of English.

An important consideration emerging from these ethnographic depictions of rural encounters with the English language brings to bear the reality that English situated in rural circumstances takes on the qualities of a foreign language and thus the business of learning and teaching English in rural areas merits specialized attention and should be addressed expediently. This is why perhaps the use of translation, for example, in teaching should be adopted as a useful strategy but teachers should be properly trained in how to use it effectively.

5. Infrastructure Development for Literacy Learning

Infrastructure wise, rural schools in the study were found to have made it a point to designate spaces for English literacy events. These areas include reading corners or self access corners, reading gazebos or huts, and library or resource centres. In terms of print material, the schools' collections of English books are found to be adequate in numbers. However not many books were borrowed by the students because they found most of the books *"difficult to read, boring, old, or not having time to read"*.

Only two of the twelve schools had a computer lab and computers. Even so these computers were rarely used for teaching and learning. Only the principal of one of the schools got teachers to choose and purchase CD-ROM for students to learn English, Bahasa Melayu and Maths.

In the communities, communication infrastructures with an education focus was slowly making inroads through rural development plans and projects. At the time of the research cyber cafes and community ICT centres were some of the introductions planned by the Ministry of Rural Development. Nationwide, it was reported that a total of 70% of primary school (5010) and 46% or 758 of secondary school still did not have access to computer facilities; while a total of 6478 or 90% of primary and 1082 or 66% of secondary schools did not have internet access (International Labour Organization, 1996-2000).

The ILO report also estimated that the ratio of urban households to rural households owning personal computers (PCs) and having access to the internet was 13:10. Income disparity between urban and rural households was the main factor. Telephone and electricity supply and coverage have been extensive in Malaysia. Even then, 7% of the rural population was still without 24-hour electricity supply.

While these findings from case studies should not be generalised, they provide to a certain extent a window to view how English language literacy learning and teaching was conducted in some rural schools. However, as it becomes increasingly imperative for all Malaysians in the 21st century to master English, the limited standard in English literacy that is currently experienced by rural school students has become a major concern. As Malaysia embraces globalization and the development of a knowledge- based society, it has also become increasingly apparent that being literate in the 21st century entails skills beyond the basic ability to read and write in English.

6. Conclusion

While the study concluded that the rural communities investigated had a high literacy rate in Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin, and Tamil, literacy in English language was limited and confined to the physical environment of the school and school

work related practices and literacy events. Thus the school is the instrumental infrastructure through which ideologies of English literacy practices are channelled and sustained in the rural communities.

But the reality of Malaysia's education system is that there are at least 2.3 million or 76.3% of primary pupils in national schools (5,789), 620,000 in Chinese schools and more than 80,000 in Tamil schools. Among these, 4,036 are in rural schools. Out of this figure, 84.3% of primary schools in Malaysia are classified as rural schools; at the secondary level, the percentage of rural schools is 5.1%. (MOE, 1996)

In its latest proposal to raise the performance of rural schools (MOE/EPRD, 1996), MOE identified five categories of 'rural' schools based on basic facilities, communication and parental socio-economic status. These categories are:

i) Remote schools - schools in isolated areas, having no infrastructure and basic facilities.
ii) Traditional village schools - schools in traditional Malay villages, having moderate infrastructure but the socio-economic status of the population is still low.
iii) Planned settlement schools - schools in estates and other areas of planned agricultural activities, run by agencies such as FELDA.
iv) Sub-urban schools - schools neighbouring town areas, endowed with facilities and good infrastructure but the socio-economic status of the population is low.
v) High-risk schools - schools in urban or sub-urban areas, with low academic achievement, disciplinary problems and the majority of students from low socio-economic background.

The plan for achieving the aims of Vision 2020 in rural development envisage a transformation which involves both the mental development of the people themselves through literacy education programmes and a great improvement in the quality of their surroundings in terms of upgrades in infrastructure.

Until social, economic and cultural environments in the rural communities transform to include increased reliance and use of the English language for knowledge building, English language in the rural areas will remain a stranger in the linguistic landscapes of the multilingual community. When designing and planning for literacy development programmes and projects, it is pertinent for education developers and implementers to be informed of the local cultures of learning, where roles of teachers, students and the community, and ways of learning and meaning making should be understood and recognized politically, socially and culturally.

Although it is important to note that what happens in a specific classroom is influenced by political, social, and cultural factors of the larger community, each classroom is unique in the way the learners and teachers in that classroom interact with one another in the learning of English. Given the diversity of local cultures of learning, local teachers must be given the right and the responsibility to employ methods that are culturally sensitive and productive in their students' learning of English (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). Hence one of the major assumptions that need to be redressed is the notion of teaching English not as a second or foreign language but as an International language recognizing the diverse ways in which plurilingual (borrowing a term from Koo Yew Lie, 2005) speakers make use of English to fulfil their specific purposes.

Situating English language learning in local practices is further effected when using source culture content in materials. This minimizes the potential of marginalizing the values and lived experiences of the learners. For such a view is in keeping with the political motto "think globally, act locally" which translated into a language pedagogy might be "global thinking, local teaching" (p200). Source culture content can also encourage learners to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture and to learn the language needed to explain these cultural elements in English to individuals from different cultures.

Cortazzi and Jin (1996, 1999) distinguish three types of cultural information that can be used in language textbooks and materials:

1. source culture materials—draw on learners' own culture as content.
2. target culture materials—use the culture of the native English country
3. international target culture—use a great variety of cultures in English and non-English speaking countries around the world.

And finally, the skills envisioned for the 21st century (NCERL, 2000) have revealed two equally important facts about the Digital age. Firstly, technological innovation definitely has direct and significant impact on the economic and social transformations of communities and what counts as literacy. Secondly, information and communication technologies are deeply dependent on literacy.

From this perspective then, it is increasingly clear that the new millennium has brought onto us new ways of practising and thinking about literacy and how it operates in the globalized and technology-mediated world. In literacy education, what the 21st century demands of the learners across all age groups and of teaching are:

1. learners who are proficient in four interrelated dimensions of language use. Luke and Freebody (2002) have identified the textual resources that students need to access to be literate as: code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst.

2. teaching that uses multimodal texts to provide a bridge between the real-life texts of the community and school texts and encourage a real-world, interdisciplinary approach to learning through the use of disciplined knowledge.
3. curriculum approach that harness diversity and leads learner transformation through a focus on four knowledge processes—experiencing, conceptualising, analysing and applying.

(Healy, 2004; Luke and Freebody, 2002)

Within this framework traditional school literacies that is, reading, writing and arithmetic must be transformed and refined in the context of an information and multimodal environment (Warlick, 2004).

In closing, I would like to reiterate the importance for education developers and implementers that literacy practices whether print-based or technology based is inherently embedded in one's social context. Being literate means being able to read, write and communicate in the social, economical and political contexts. Creating a community of practice for English literacy in the rural community, characterized by mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of language(s) (to borrow Wenger's term, 1998) could possibly help provide the interaction between physical local spaces and cognitive relationships for language and literacy development without stripping these practices of their meanings.

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[1] Rural is defined as areas with population density of less than 1,000 persons per square mile and that with more than 1,000 is categorized as urban.

[2] The writer acknowledges other ethnicities and languages that make up modern Malaysia but is limiting the scope of this paper only to the major ethnic groups namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians and their languages.

Colonised era macro-environment: Need to be literate in English for employment in urban areas

Ethnic values and ways: vernacular literacy and rural micro-environmental ways

Bahasa Melayu as a national language and medium of instruction at national schools. Eng and POL as subjects

English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. (year 1/year 3)

Vernacular language as medium of instruction, English and BM as subjects