Student-Teachers' Experiences in Creating Oral History Texts

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian government has announced the use of CEFR aligned English textbooks imported from the United Kingdom in schools. However, the use of imported textbooks faces much oppositions. The proponents of Malaysian based textbooks believe that English textbooks written in English should give due consideration to contents based on local setting. Thus, the researchers worked collaboratively with thirty, Year 3 Teaching English as a Second Language student-teachers who have enrolled in the course, Teaching Reading Skills in English as a Second Language. One of the course objectives is to produce an English supplementary book which consists of oral history texts with local context for lower secondary students. The research objective is to find out to what extent the student-teachers have gained from creating the oral history texts. This study employed a qualitative research approach adopting a case study method. Data were collected from a purposive sampling of 30 TESL student-teachers, who wrote the oral history texts. The research instruments employed were reflective journals, document analysis and interviews. The main findings show that the student-teachers gained valuable experiences in creating oral history texts for an ESL reading classroom. Besides some challenges faced, they gained a better realisation of the principles of teaching reading and material development in an ESL context. It is hoped that this study could give insights to the educators, policy makers and textbook writers in developing and using English textbooks with local contexts.

Keywords: Oral history text; Teaching reading skills; Material development; TESL student-teachers

INTRODUCTION

The government of Malaysia has announced that starting from 2018, both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia would use imported English textbooks from the United Kingdom (The Star, 5th October 2017). The imported textbooks would be used to teach the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum for Secondary (SBELC) curriculum. The SBELC has been aligned with the newly introduced Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The Council of Europe has developed CEFR as a guide to gauge foreign language users' proficiency. This move is part of the reform taken by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to ensure secondary school students achieve international standards' proficiency level.

The usage of imported textbooks instead of the locally produced textbooks has led to mixed reactions from the public (Johar & Abdul Aziz 2019). An education activist and a professor at UCSI University, Malaysia, lauded the government's move as he argued that the

imported textbooks from the UK are written in native English language, which is of a higher level in terms of its grammatical structure and vocabulary, than locally produced textbooks. The concerns over the government's move are that there is an underlying assumption that English texts produced in the UK by its native speakers are far more superior in terms of language and content, and that they are the only authority of the English language. The question is that why are Malaysians moving backwards to glorifying British culture and language? If Malaysians are, then Malaysians have not moved beyond a colonial mindset. Malaysia, for centuries, has been open to other cultural influences while remaining rooted in our identity. While, there may be some merit in importing foreign textbooks, Malaysians must not neglect the contribution of multilingual and cultural diversity in Malaysia to the English language (Nambiar, Hashim & Mohammad Yasin 2018). Budsaba Kanoksilapatham (2018) argues, "Given the influence of English hegemony and a number of trends generated from globalisation, national identity has emerged as one of the major concerns among scholars, educators, and even politicians for fear that it will be threatened or subjugated by other influential cultures" (p.127). Many Malaysian researchers believe that there is value for our Malaysian students to read and write texts that are representative of their real-world context. Students' written works should be used as supplementary materials in secondary schools throughout Malaysia (Ahmad Sukor & Embi 2017).

The Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) student-teachers should be taught on how to produce a local context textbook, supplementary materials or workbook as part of their programme requirements. In this study, the TESL student-teachers were asked to produce a workbook which consists of reading comprehension texts based on the theme – 'family'. They were asked to develop lesson plans on reading activities and reading comprehension questions based on the oral history texts. The aim of developing this oral history workbook was to enable the student-teachers to see their real-world experiences represented in the English language and subsequently feel a sense of ownership of the language. Based on this belief, this study was embarked to address the following research question: How did the TESL student-teachers' experience on the development of oral history text help them to understand the principle of teaching reading and material development to teach reading in an ESL context?

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are three theories underpinning this study. They are Post colonialism, Principle of Material Development and Oral history as pedagogical practice.
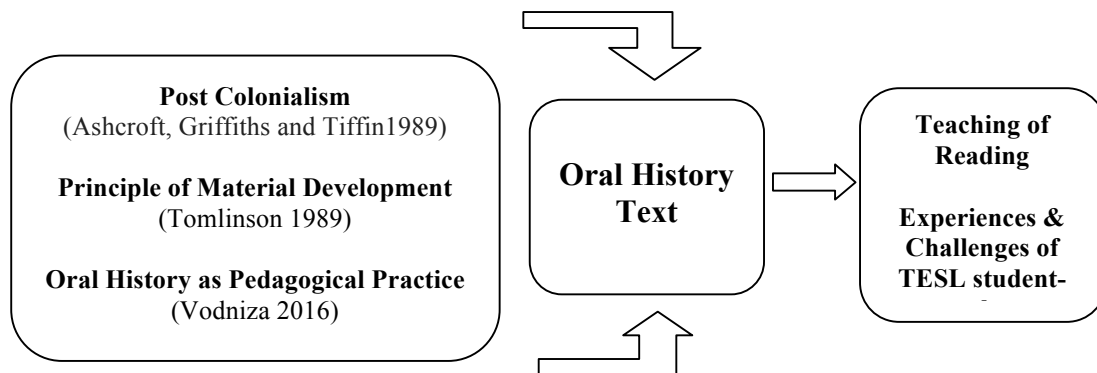

FIGURE 1. Conceptual Framework

POST COLONIALISM

The term 'post-colonial' could be defined as "all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the moment of today" (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p. 2). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain in 'The Empire Writes Back' that today, English is a world language and the publication of literature in English is dominated by the former British colonies. Consequently, it is not enough to deal with solely British based texts in school. In fact, all texts from the imperial centre "can be made to serve colonial interests through educational systems that devaluate native literatures, and by Euro-centric practices which insist on Western texts being markers of superior culture and value" (Loomba 1998, p. 75).

Scholes (1998) argues that if the teaching materials used in the classrooms are not incorporated into the students' communicative lives, the materials will have lost their values because they could not be practised in the students' life. Scholes extends this further when he argues that students should not only be consumers but also producers of texts. He further claims that, "The best preparation we can give our students will be the highest level of competence as readers and writers, producers and consumers of the various texts they will encounter" (ibid. p. 154). He sums it up when he states, "one needs to be able to read, interpret, and criticise texts in a wide range of modes, genres, and media. What our students need, to function in such a world, then, is an education for a society still struggling to balance its promises of freedom and equality, still hoping to achieve greater measures of social justice, still trying not to homogenise its people but to allow for social mobility and to make the lower levels of its economic structure tolerable and humane" (ibid. p. 84). In getting student-teachers to create their oral history texts, it is hoped that they will in turn practise this oral history pedagogy in their own classroom and learn to value their students' writings.

In lieu of Scholes' conception of an English Education, where its learners are encouraged to be critical readers and producers of texts, that this study was conceived. In constructing their own oral history texts, the TESL student-teachers enrolled in the course 'Teaching of reading in an ESL context' had to critically study the three elements of textuality; how to situate a text (history), how to compose one (production), and how to read one (consumption). They examined and made a link between their own oral history texts with social justice on issues being discussed in the English textbook for Form 2. The TESL student-teachers who have developed critical thinking on the community's social issues would in turn create a classroom that would encourage and nurture the same critical thinking among their own students. The TESL student-teachers should not be mere consumers of texts, but they also need to be producers of texts. Their oral history texts should inscribe and re inscribe their own social reality in the Malaysian context so they may represent their own experiences whilst examining how their experiences are discursively constructed within a social, cultural and historical context (Scholes 1998).

PRINCIPLES OF MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

According to Tomlinson (2012), learning resources can be defined as materials which can be used to facilitate the teaching and learning of a language. The materials should be: (a) informative, (b) instructional, (c) experiential, (d) eliciting and (e) exploratory. He further adds that materials should be developed for learning and not merely for teaching and it should perform all the above-mentioned functions. He further asserts that no course book could meet the needs and wants of every (or even any) class. Therefore, in order to cater to the needs of every class, teachers should develop their own teaching materials.

Both scholars, Tomlinson (2012) and Krashen (1988) propose that good English language teaching and learning materials should be impactful to students. Students should feel comfortable or at ease in reading the materials. In any attempt to introduce new

materials, it is utmost important that the materials need to be relevant to the learners' needs (Zainal Abidin & Mohamad 2019; Nambiar, Hashim & Mohammad Yasin 2019). The reading materials should also promote learners' self-investment by involving them in creating their own learning resources, which are more authentic. The newly introduced materials should also draw learners' attention to linguistic features of the input. The materials developed should consider learners' varying learning styles and affective attitudes. Ample time should be given to readers to comprehend the reading materials. Educators should also permit a silent period in the beginning of instruction. In the process of developing materials, care should be given to materials which encourage intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement that stimulates both right and left-brain hemispheres through activities like singing a song. These materials produced should ensure non-reliance on controlled practice since it is retained only in short-term memory. The material developers should provide opportunities for the students to give feedback by activities that encourage them to check their language achievement. In this study, in order to develop credible reading materials targeted for lower secondary school students, the researchers who are experienced as secondary school teachers and lecturers teaching 'Teaching of Reading course', and TESL student-teachers reviewed the oral history texts based on the material evaluation guidelines developed by Tomlinson (2012) and Krashen (1988).

ORAL HISTORY AS AN EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE IN SCHOOL

Portelli (1997), a professor of American literature at the University of Rome-La Sapienze, defines oral history as a specific form of discourse in which history evokes a narrative of the past, and oral indicates a medium of expression. Another historian, Walker (2006), has used oral histories extensively in her research i.e. about memory, communities of memory, and how people construct the past. She states that oral history refers to the very act of telling stories about the past events. Oral history is a platform for the writers to make meaning, interpret, and provide explanation. It is also a platform for creative and innovative learning and teaching which involve the whole self in the learning experience. Embodied learning takes a learner on a journey that is visual, oral and academic. Oral history is a perfect vehicle for embodied learning as it engages the students actively in a sensory and collaborative experience.

In this study, the TESL student-teachers created oral history texts as reading materials so their students may see the value of personal stories. The targeted students started out with little or no knowledge of what oral history entails. However, the TESL student-teachers facilitated them along their reading and lessons.

Oral history promotes the concept of learning from another person's experiences. In this study, the students learn from their TESL student-teachers' family stories. The students could connect the learning content to their personal family stories where it would emulate the interest in reading among the students. The family themed stories are not only relevant to the students' needs but also to their self-interest. The oral history also provides a platform to assemble anecdotes, life experiences, and traditional knowledge of parents, grandparents and great grandparents which cannot be found in traditional textbooks and curriculum. Vodniza (2016) emphasises on the importance in connecting students' lives through oral history and storytelling. The students would learn to recognise and celebrate an individual's culture and heritage. He used oral history and traditional storytelling in his teaching practice to support students in discovering traditional values and identities. This is very much practical in our normal ESL classroom where the collection of stories from the TESL student-teachers were collected and utilised as interesting reading materials for English language lessons.

METHODOLOGY

A case study was employed to conduct this qualitative research. This research design is considered appropriate as the researchers were interested in obtaining a better and in-depth understanding (Yin 2009; Creswell 2009) of the TESL student-teachers' experiences in developing oral history texts and carrying out reading activities for Form 2 ESL reading class.

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. The selection criteria were the participants must be TESL student-teachers who enrolled in 'Teaching of Reading Skills' course in the Faculty of Education, UKM. They must also be the writers of the oral history texts. Therefore, a total number of thirty, Year 3 TESL student-teachers were selected for this study. Out of the thirty student-teachers, twenty of them volunteered for the individual interview. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the participants' identities.

The research instruments used to triangulate and corroborate the data in this study are personal reflective journal (PRJ), field notes (FN), document analysis (DA) and individual interviews (STI). The participants were asked to keep a personal reflective journal detailing what they have learnt and the experiences they have encountered. Classroom observations were conducted by two experts (experienced TESL lecturers). Their observations were documented as field notes. Two of the researchers served as non-participant observers and recorded the progress of the lessons' implementation in Form 2 classrooms of two secondary schools. Two of the researchers carried out individual interviews to interrogate the TESL student-teachers' experiences in developing the oral history texts for teaching of reading in an ESL classroom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in verbatim.

In order to increase validity and reliability of this study, the researcher applied triangulation method. According to Creswell (2012), triangulation is the process of corroborating evidences from different individuals, methods or types of data. Another measure taken was the interview questions were reviewed by experts before being used during the interview sessions. The transcriptions of the interview responses were checked by participants for verification. A few measures to comply with research ethical conduct were taken. Letters were sent to the schools' principal to seek their permission. Consent letters were also given to the student-teachers and the researchers explained to them that their participation is voluntary and their confidentiality is protected.

FINDINGS

This section provides the answers of this study research question (RQ): How did the TESL student-teachers' experience on the development of oral history texts help them to understand the principle of material development for teaching reading in an ESL context? The answers for the RQ are divided into 3 stages namely pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing and implementation stage.

PRE-WRITING STAGE

In the pre-writing stage, the TESL student-teachers have gained valuable knowledge as they are still in the embryonic stage of writing oral history texts.

CONSIDERATION FOR THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF THE TARGETED STUDENTS

The TESL student-teachers expressed that they gave great importance for the needs and interests as well as the values they wanted to instil onto the targeted students even before

writing the oral history text. According to participants' perception, the students' needs refer to their ability to understand the vocabulary, sentence structure and storyline of the oral history texts. Interest, according to the participants, is the content that students could relate to and be able to grab their attention. The statement is derived from two participants' interview responses.

> *"I have to match with the students' need and I have to make sure that all the story, all the flow of the story is suitable for the students' themselves, for the level of the students and also, I have to make sure the usage of the words and also when constructing the question as well"* (Nora, STI).

> *"There is a sufficient need to make it very compatible for the students because it is the matter of their interest. Because when the text is something out the context, out of the experiences, we could not grab their attention"*. (Johari, STI).

One of the values of developing these oral histories is that the themes of these texts are varied derived from the participants' personal experiences namely single parent's struggles in facing challenges in life, family struggles to meet basic needs, irresponsible father, siblings' rivalry, relationship among siblings and caring for grandparents, which are rarely found in traditional textbooks and curriculum. These multiple narratives are representative of our Malaysian students' real-lived experiences instead of the reductive and stereotypical representations found in local textbooks. These findings also parallel with one of the participants' personal reflective journal – where careful consideration was given to the aspects of the targeted students' needs and interests. Azlan wrote in his reflective journal, "*…When looking for a topic for oral history text, I need to find a topic that is suitable to all readers*."

At the prewriting stage, the participants have learned they need to ensure that the designed texts should adhere to the principle of material development proposed by Tomlinson (2012). The reading materials should be designed according to a few functions: (a) informative, (b) instructional, (c) experiential, (d) eliciting and (e) exploratory. The reading materials should have the elements of novelty and variety. In addition, when the materials are interesting and appealing, they could spark the students' motivation to read them (Krashen 1988; Tomlinson 2012). The vocabulary, storyline and sentence structure of the reading materials should not be too difficult for the targeted students.

WHILE WRITING

DECIDING ON THE LENGTH OF THE ORAL HISTORY TEXT

Analysis of the student-teachers' oral history texts revealed that they had written quite a lengthy text between 3 to 4 pages. The texts were later given to two experts for the reviewing and editing processes. The experts were two English teachers who have more than 5 years experiences in teaching English. During the editing process, they were instructed to shorten their oral history text as most of the passages in the Form 2 textbook are within the range of 500-600 words. The teachers also commented on the vocabulary and sentence structure. The texts were revised by the participants according to the experts' comments.

In the field notes and participants' reflective journals, it was documented that after the participants have revised the texts, they were instructed to carry out the reading activities in two secondary schools. The twenty participants were divided into several small groups of four. Two researchers observed the participants at each school. In small groups of four, each group taught one class. Each class consists of 30-35 students.

The researchers' observation of the student-teachers' classroom teaching revealed they struggled to maintain the students' interests while reading the oral history texts. Iman

commented, "*We have to ensure that the length of the text is suitable with the learners' level. Previously, we make it three pages and we have to shorten it into 1 page*". Similar comment was also uttered by Johari, "*Actually yes, many of our texts are too long and in that point I think that they are actually having quite a difficulty to stay focus because we have many long pages*".

One of the participants' personal reflective journals also expressed similar concern. Azrina wrote in her personal reflective journal "*… I realised that the story of my essay is quite heavy for secondary level, and lecturers finally chose Mawar's essay to be our group's reading material*".

<div align="center">BALANCED DISTRIBUTION OF VOCABULARIES</div>

The participants mentioned that another important factor to consider at this stage is the range of vocabulary used in the oral history texts. The vocabulary should be within the Form 2 KSSM syllabus and the distribution of new words should be appropriate to the targeted student's level. Their concern is evidenced from their interview responses. Aliya highlighted that,"*I was worried that some of the language or the word usage might be difficult for the students to understand*". Marissa also shared the same concern, "*I learned that the reading text itself must be within the range of the students' understanding*".

In the same vein, three participants also reflected the same concern in their reflective journals. Lee Ann reflected, "*I re-read the text for a few times and I was pretty confident that it would make an impact to the readers. I also made sure that the language and vocabularies used are friendly to the young readers that I will be facing during the reading lesson*". Najwa also wrote similar opinion, "*... the text must be comprehensive yet interesting with appropriate vocabulary used in the text.*"

The writing experience gave the participants the valuable experience on how to write an oral history text which adhere to the principle of teaching reading and material development. Hussin, Nimehchisalem, Kalajahi and Yunus (2016) stated in their study that learners in Malaysia usually face difficulties in acquiring their four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing in English language, due to their limited number of vocabulary. They suggested that the students' difficulties can be solved by giving serious attention to effective learning of vocabulary.

The designed oral history texts also adhere to the guidelines for material development proposed by Tomlinson (2012) and Krashen (1988). The number of new words in the text needed to be appropriate to the students' level with a good distribution of vocabulary across the texts (simple to complex).

<div align="center">PARALLEL TO STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY LEVEL</div>

The participants also learned not only to pay attention on the vocabulary selection but also on the students' level of English proficiency. This conclusion is derived from Haikal's interview responses:

> "*We need to filter the suitable text according to the suitable level, level of the students because every student has different main issue right. So, we really need to come out with few steps and we need to see which text fits and relate with the students' real life experiences*". (Haikal, STI).

The researchers believe that the participants have learned to ensure that the written oral history texts need to be parallel with the targeted students' proficiency level. Two participants shared their views and experience in their reflective notes.

"*… As a teacher, we need to be aware of the selection of the text and the context of the question and it must be parallel with the text. It is because we have to understand the students' ability of interpreting the text because the level of the text is important towards student participation in the classroom*" (Nazmi, PRJ).

"*…. We must help the students to understand text in a simple way*" (Priscilla, PRJ).

POST WRITING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE READING LESSON

IMPACT OF THE LESSON

The experiences gained during the implementation of the lesson, provided the participants with both positive and negative feedback. These feedback helped them to improvise their oral history texts. During the implementation of the reading activities, it was recorded in the field notes that the participants faced situations where students were not responding well. This was obvious from the students' facial expressions. From the researchers' observation, the situation was because they were not familiar with their new teachers (participants). They were reticent to talk or give expected responses.

This is also evident in Raihana's interview responses. She stated, "*Sometimes, when you are teaching you might feel the students' comprehension through their facial expressions. Some of them might follow but some of them might stare at you blankly*".

In certain classrooms, the participants realised that the level of vocabulary in the oral history text was slightly high for the students. They realised that their family themed oral history text should be simple to cater for the low proficiency students. Lee Ann expressed herself by saying in the interview that, "*The content itself whether or not it is too deep for the students to actually digest and understand and relate to and as well as the language because you know in one classroom there are students of different levels of ability when it comes to the language usage so I was struggling when I need to use lesser range of the tenses or easier vocabs instead of the complex one and in terms of the relating classroom activities* ".

It is clear in the participants' reflective journals that in some classes the oral history text was delivered successfully. The students were able to read and understand the story besides giving positive responses. The success of the reading class can be linked to the written statement by the participants in their personal reflective journal. Iylia reflected, "*I have learnt the way to develop our own teaching materials, questions and also classroom management. Developing our own teaching material can ensure that we could cater to every students' preference and personal experience. Some of the materials that are available readily like the textbook might not be applicable to all students thus making them unable to relate to the topic. If the students are able to relate to the content of our teaching materials, they will become more interested to learn*".

REALISATION ON ASPECTS TO CONSIDER IN WRITING ORAL HISTORY TEXTS

The experiences gained by the participants gave the realisation that there are many factors to consider while writing. Although the participants had enrolled in the course 'Teaching Reading in ESL context' in which they learned the theoretical aspects of conducting reading lessons and developing reading materials, their macro teaching experiences in the secondary school strengthen their theoretical knowledge. Lee Ann's view during the interview, "*At first, my knowledge was really shallow when it comes to this reading class because of my previous experiences as a student, but later on when I was learning from my lecturer in this course, I found out that there are actually many aspects that we need to pay attention to during a reading lesson in an ESL classroom like you know, the whole casts, the language usage and the content itself, a lot of stuff that we need to actually pay attention to*".

PUTTING THEORIES INTO PRACTICE

This study provides ample opportunity for the participants to put into practice all the knowledge they gained from the course, 'Reading in an ESL Context' as mentioned by Haikal in his individual interview, " *This course helped to practice the theory in the class. It actually improved my writing and teaching skill. I improved my understanding in reading text because this course taught me how to separate types of questions, which level it should be and then how to write suitable texts for students. Many things are new for me because before this when I see a text, I just see a text. After I joined this course, I learned that there are many things that we can do with reading texts*".

IMPROVED ORAL HISTORY TEXT WRITING SKILLS

The participants have improved their oral history text writing skills. This will be a stepping stone towards producing more authentic reading materials in ESL context in the future. This is evident from the responses recorded from one of the interviews and a participant's reflective notes. Ally highlighted, " *I gained knowledge about how to create a good text and how to relate with the questions so that the students are able to understand and analyse the text to answer the question. Yes, it is useful in future so that I will be able to create a very good text and comprehension questions that the students can use*". Mawar also reflected, "*I personally like this task because it helps to build our sense of imagination in creating a story*".

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the TESL student-teachers' experiences have shown that they have understood the principle of material development for teaching reading in an ESL context as proposed by Tomlinson (2012). The designed oral history texts are informative, experiential and exploratory. When the TESL student-teachers composed their oral narrative texts, the content revolve around their own family matters. There were a variety of themes emerging from the topic 'family'. The themes identified were single parent's struggle to face life challenges, family's struggle to meet basic needs, father's abuse, sibling's rivalry and relationship and grandparents' ailment. These themes are very often absent in traditional textbooks and curriculum. These texts are rich accounts of their own personal experiences and are forms of representations which express the diversity that exists within Malaysia's socio cultural and political contexts.

     The study also provides an opportunity for the TESL student-teachers to be writers that inscribe and re-inscribe their own social reality in Malaysian context. The stories resemble happiness, sadness and challenges faced by typical Malaysian families. Thus, every student who read this story would be able to connect himself or herself because it is written based on Malaysian context. Furthermore, the collection of the oral history texts were developed without necessitating an investment in new classroom materials (Crocco 1998).

     Findings of this study have direct implications on the TESL student-teachers. They have gained valuable experience on how to develop oral history texts for the teaching of reading in an ESL classroom. They gained a greater understanding on the principles of reading, teaching reading and material development in an ESL context. This experience will be a stepping stone for the student-teachers to enable them to produce more reading materials based on Malaysian social and cultural context. The study shows that there is value for our Malaysian students to write texts that are representative of their cultural and real-world

context in order for them to see themselves represented in a language that would become less foreign and eventually feel a sense of ownership to the language.

The findings will be able to guide the current and future teacher training educators. Teacher-educators may need to implement more material development courses in the universities for the fresh student-teachers so that they will not merely be consumers of materials but also developers of teaching and reading materials which are based on Malaysian social and cultural context.

Curriculum planners and developers may also need to consider using more locally produced teaching and learning materials. This study also shows that TESL student-teachers could be trained to be material developers in the future. Locally produced authentic materials based on Malaysian social and cultural context could help our students to value their own culture more. Rather than depending on professionally and commercially produced textbooks and teaching materials, the curricular developers should encourage local, non-commercial materials which are not driven by the profit imperative but rather driven by considerations of the needs and wants of the target learners and by principles of language acquisition.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the student-teachers' experiences in developing oral history text for the teaching of reading in Form two ESL classroom. The findings showed that students-teachers gained valuable experiences and a deeper understanding of the principles of teaching reading and material development through the intertwining engagement between theory and practice. The process of developing the oral history text for the reading class also harnessed the student-teachers' creativity and thinking skills. They can continuously value creative and critical thinking skills while being engaged in their respective classrooms in the future. Besides, the student-teachers learned to value personal narrative as a mean to engage with social and cultural issues, by reading the 'word and the world', connecting the personal with the sociocultural and engaging the students both cognitively and affectively (Tomlinson 2008). These experiences are believed to boost their confidence in developing more teaching and learning materials that are representative of our cultural setting and they can see themselves being represented in the target language.

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