

## Implementation of a Western-based Multiliteracies Pedagogy in Malaysia: A Socio-cultural Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses arising issues when a Western pedagogy in a Malaysian context is implemented. In finding a suitable pedagogy to address issues of low employability among Malaysian university graduates, academia prefers to implement a learning pedagogy such as multiliteracies approach from Western countries. However this practice is creating issues of adaptability among Malaysian students. Therefore this study investigates the implementation of the Multiliteracies pedagogy, a Western teaching approach; in a Malaysian university classroom that taught English as a Second Language (ESL). The method of the study was grounded to the philosophy of a participatory action research and data was collected through classroom observation, informal conversations and classroom artefacts. 30 Bakti Polytechnic students' experiences using the multiliteracies approach in learning ESL was the focus of this study. Due to the importance of reflection and action in a participatory action research, data was analysed through a Critical Reflective Analysis Steps, which included the process of observing and noting personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action. The findings suggest that students had issues with working in teams, completing critical analysis and participating actively in classroom discussions. The study proposes a framework to guide the implementation of a Western-based pedagogy in a Malaysian context. Indeed, the practice requires deep deliberation of the students' socio-cultural practices and cultures of learning to ensure that optimum result could be achieved from the introduction of the new pedagogy.

**Keywords:** culture; multiliteracies; socio-cultural; participatory action research; Malaysian learning context

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of the employability skills of Malaysian university graduates has been the attention of academia, policymakers, employers and community members. Literature shows that the issue of unemployment among Malaysian university graduates was associated with the low employability skills of the graduates (Hairuszila, Hazadiah & Normah, 2009; Morshidi et al., 2012). The issue also received serious attention from the Malaysian government. In 2005, the Ministry of Human Resources of Malaysia introduced the Unemployed Graduate Training Scheme that provided short courses in English language and communication skills for unemployed university graduates (National Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). In 2006, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) introduced the Malaysian Soft Skills Scale as a guideline to incorporate lifelong learning

skills such as language and communication, information and technology, teamwork and entrepreneurial skills in the formal curriculum of Malaysian public universities. Soft skills were defined as “generic skills that include cognitive elements related to non-academic abilities, such as positive values, leadership, teamwork, communication and lifelong learning” (MOHE, 2006, p. 9). In 2011, MOHE published *Malaysia’s Blueprint of the Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020)* that focuses on the strategies and initiatives to inculcate lifelong learning skills among Malaysians. Subsequently in 2012, MOHE published a *Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017* to “ensure a higher education environment that encourages the growth of premier knowledge centres and graduates who are competent, knowledgeable, and innovative with high moral values in order to meet national and international needs” (p. 1).

Among the factors that have been identified as contributing to the low employability rate among Malaysian universities’ graduates were English language proficiency and communication skills (Hazita et al., 2010; National Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). Hazita et al. (2010) stated that employers claimed some university graduates failed at interview level because they were not able to answer questions that were asked in English. The employers asserted that some graduates requested for permission to use Bahasa Malaysia (the national language) when interviewed in English. They also claimed that some graduates did not have the confidence to communicate and conduct presentations effectively. In addition, some studies indicated that the low employability rate among Malaysian university graduate was due to inadequate knowledge on technological use and skills of higher order thinking that include critical thinking and problem-solving (Fitriehara, Ramlah and Rahim, 2009). Fitriehara et al. (2009) also reported that some students had issues in applying their knowledge of technology in completing tasks. Furthermore, some studies (Morshidi et al., 2012; Norizan, Hazita, Mohd Salehuddin , Azizah, & Wong , 2007) associated the low employability rate of the Malaysian university graduates to the mismatch between what was taught at the universities and the skills needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Morshidi et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study that involved interviewing 11 focus groups that consisted of employers, graduates, government officers and university staff. They reported that the graduates, employers and government officers agreed that university curricula should be revamped to better address employability needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Norizan et al. (2007) and Zuraidah et al. (2006) conducted two separate studies on the current trends of teaching and learning of the English language in Malaysian universities. Both studies suggested that the learning objectives of the programs of most Malaysian universities were no longer relevant to the present times, and suggested the curriculum to be revised to include competencies and language skills that will enable students to master English for academic, employment and social purposes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The studies show that in order to solve the low employability rate amongst Malaysian graduates, some university graduates need more training in these areas:

- i. English language proficiency,
- ii. Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) skills,
- iii. Communication skills, and
- iv. Higher-order thinking skills .

The 21<sup>st</sup> century brings a new dimension to the education world and it is important that learning in Malaysian universities focuses on equipping graduates with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in a variety of domains such as work, academic and social settings. At the practical level, it is important to have a suitable pedagogical approach to inculcate necessary skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addressing this issue, many researchers conducted studies on the area of integrating technology in teaching and learning. For example, Irfan

Naufal and Nurullizam (2011) conducted a study on the trends of information, communication and technology (ICT) research in teacher education field by analysing papers presented at two conferences in Malaysia: *1st International Malaysian Educational Technology Convention 2007* and *2nd International Malaysian Educational Technology Convention 2008*. Their study shows that ICT researches in teacher education focussed on three areas: delivery system, learning environment and learning outcomes. They asserted that research on learning environments focussed on the integration of ICT tools in learning to imitate the working environments of the students in the future.

As such this study provided a platform for rethinking the current curriculum and classroom practices through an investigation of Malaysian students' learning experiences using the multiliteracies approach. Even though the pedagogy of multiliteracies has been a widely researched area (Ajayi, 2010; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a; Mills, 2009), the focus of most current research was mainly on multiliteracies learning in Western settings. To date, there has been no major study conducted on investigating Malaysian university students' learning experiences using a multiliteracies approach through a participatory action research methodology. In addition, research on the employability issue among Malaysian graduates seemed to concentrate on the study of the universities' curriculum with less attention to what was happening in the classroom. This study investigated what was happening in the classroom and how the multiliteracies approach helped in achieving the national goals of producing university graduates that are compatible with the changes and transformation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In particular, the current research project explored the ways in which Malaysian students learn English as a Second Language (ESL) using the multiliteracies approach; a Western-based pedagogy. It also highlights how Malaysian socio-cultural factors contributed to the students' learning process. Thus, the current paper will answer the following research question:

1. What are the socio-cultural factors that influenced the students' learning?
2. How did the students' socio-cultural background influence the process and outcome of implementing a multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian ESL classroom?

In order to answer the questions, the current paper firstly discusses the concept of multiliteracies and the relevance of considering culture in exploring learning. The methodology and findings of the study will be presented after that.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH TOWARDS TEACHING ESL**

The concept of multiliteracies was conceptualised by a group of scholars known as The New London Group (2000) with the emergence of global economy and technological advancement that have revolutionised the contemporary world in terms of the spread and use of global English, shift of work culture, and advancement of technology. These changes require a transformation of the pedagogical approaches used in classrooms (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a, 2009b; Gee, 2002; Kalantzis, 2006; The New London Group, 2000). The multiliteracies approach focuses on the transformation of pedagogy to support the characteristics of new communication channels, which focus on multimodality and are changing the ways information are being conveyed and interpreted (Baguley, Pullen, & Short, 2010; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Multimodality is making meaning through the incorporation of a variety of modes including gestural, verbal, audio, visual and printed texts that are usually present in the new communication channels such as websites, blogs and social media. It is essential that the education field incorporates the use of these multimodal resources in teaching and learning

processes as these resources are prominent in the daily lives of the students in this era (Thang et al., 2014). Multiliteracies pedagogy is not only about using technological gadgets and multimodal resources in learning but also about incorporating the skills and knowledge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as analysing and synthesizing. At a basic level, learners are now required to be able to make meaning, analyse and evaluate information, and communicate ideas and messages effectively using a range of available technological inventions in a variety of situations (Gee, 2000; The New London Group, 2000).

To inculcate the knowledge and skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in learning, the New London Group (1996, 2000) suggests four components:

- i. overt instruction,
- ii. situated practice,
- iii. critical framing ,
- iv. transformed practice.

In Situated Practice, the teacher and students explore the students' existing knowledge and skills through the use of multimodal resources which includes print, audio and visual texts. In Overt Instruction, the teacher facilitates learning through a scaffolding process using deductive approach or direct teaching. In this component, the teacher bridges the students' existing knowledge and skills to new information and knowledge through interactions with multimodal and technological resources. In Critical Framing, the students would be involved in learning activities that encourage critical thinking and analysis among the learners. Finally, in Transformed Practice, the students are facilitated to transform their existing knowledge and skills to new social contexts, thus creating new knowledge and skills. The components do not come in a linear hierarchy but can be found in any order and could take place simultaneously (The New London Group, 2000).

#### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURE IN LEARNING**

Socio-cultural theory suggests that all human activities are socially, culturally and historically constructed (Jaramillo, 1996; Lantolf, 2000; Turuk, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Jaramillo (1996) asserted that Vygotsky defined *social* as an entity that consists of "rules and norms of the society that adults and more competent peers teach their younger initiates" (p. 136). Socio-cultural theory also advocates that human social and mental activity is organised through culturally constructed artefacts. According to Turuk (2008), these artefacts or tools are created by humans under specific social and historical conditions, and they carry the characteristics of the culture in question. These points show that the cultural background of a society is a significant factor that influences human activities and it also shapes the society members' interpretations of the world around them. Each society has their own ways of making sense of the world around them; for example, different societies have different conceptions about learning. This point was also stressed by Hong (2009) when he defined culture as "networks of knowledge, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world" (p. 4). His definition clearly states that culture shapes the way a particular society sees, understands and makes sense of the many aspects of the world.

Socio-cultural tendencies of each society can differ from each other. Thus, to understand the students' learning process especially in a particular context, it is important to consider the ways students make meaning and make sense of the world around them. Eldridge and Cranston (2009), in their investigation of transnational education management between Australia and Thailand, asserted that the study of the socio-cultural attributes of the local setting was important to determine the correct strategies for academic and operational

management of transnational higher education programme. Novera (2004) confirmed that cultural issues were important in his investigation of adjustment process of Indonesian students studying in Australian universities. He interviewed 25 Indonesian postgraduate students who were studying in universities in Victoria, Australia and his study highlighted that the cultural differences between Indonesians and Australians had impacted the adjustment process of the Indonesian students. There were also many studies (e.g. Chia, 2011; Gan, 2009b; Shi, 2006) that have been conducted on the area of misconceptions of Asian students' learning styles due to a lack of understanding of the local socio-cultural factors that influenced learning. These studies showed that studying and understanding the socio-cultural patterns of a particular society is significant to understanding the distinctive ways of learning and how other human activities are interpreted and negotiated.

Ignoring students' socio-cultural influences towards learning might result in an inaccurate interpretation of their learning experiences. Students' behaviour or responses in a classroom might be understood inaccurately. Rosenberg, Westling, and McLeskey (2008), stated that cultural tendencies impact the way students participate in learning. They asserted that lack of knowledge about the culture of the students might lead to a misunderstanding of the students' responses or behaviour in the process of learning. They gave an example of Western students' assertiveness in the classroom as this might be perceived as inappropriate by Eastern educators. Similarly, Eastern students' quietness in the classroom might be perceived as passiveness by Western educators.

As much as it was important for Malaysian students to have a suitable pedagogical approach in achieving the goal of producing employable university graduates, as emphasized by the Malaysian government in *Graduate Employability Blueprint* (2012), it was also important to investigate the socio-cultural factors that influenced the students' learning. Therefore, the current study discusses how Malaysian socio-cultural factors influenced the learnings of 30 Bakti Polytechnic students. Since the multiliteracies approach was established in a Western learning environment, this paper explored how a Western pedagogy could be applied in a Malaysian learning context.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was a participatory action research study that investigated the implementation of the Multiliteracies pedagogy (The New London Group, 2000), a Western teaching approach; in a Malaysian polytechnic classroom that taught English as a Second Language (ESL).

## PARTICIPANTS

Participatory action research (PAR) recommends participation and equal relationship between the researcher and the researched (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008; Heron & Reason, 2006; Moore, 2004; Swantz, Ndedya, & Masaiganah, 2006), thus, the current study was carried out by a research team which consists of a university researcher, and two Bakti Polytechnic (pseudonym) lecturers as co-researchers. The study also involved 28 Diploma of Civil Engineering students as participants. The students were in their first semester and their age ranged from 19 to 20 years old. To ensure students were comfortable in giving feedback to the interviews, 12 students were asked to volunteer to be the focus group members.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

PAR recommends the inquiry process to be done in several cycles of action research process which includes planning, action, observation and reflection (Hawkins, 2010; Kemmis &

McTaggart, 2005). The current study collected data within two cycles of action research process. The overall duration of the research project was eight weeks. The first cycle began in early December 2010 with the duration of four weeks and the second cycle began in January 2011 and ended four weeks later. Data for the discussion of the current paper is from the first cycle of the research project, therefore, the paper will only describe the design of the first cycle.

To implement the multiliteracies module, the university researcher became the primary teacher in the classroom and one polytechnic lecturer assisted in all of the lessons. Meanwhile, another member of the research team took the role of a non-teaching observer, where she observed how the students negotiate learning using the multiliteracies approach. The class was conducted in two lessons per week with two-hour duration for each lesson.

In the process of the inquiry, the research team observed and identified how the students learn ESL using the multiliteracies module. During the observation, each member of the research team made personal notes on significant events that were occurring during the learning process. The observational framework was based on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of learning and the multiliteracies pedagogy. The observation focussed on:

- i. how does the use of semiotic resources such as the multimodal texts used in the multiliteracies learning module influenced the students' learning.
- ii. how does the process of scaffolding in our multiliteracies module enhanced the students learning.
- iii. what and how do the students' socio-cultural background influence the learning process.

After observations were done, a series of informal discussions with the focus group was conducted. The informal conversations are similar to semi-structured interviews but in a more informal environment. They were carried out at the end of the first cycle, when the students had completed their multiliteracies project.

### **THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

The learning activities in the current research project focussed on assisting students to complete a multiliteracies project. The multiliteracies project was to create a blog that provided information on two careers. The main purpose of this blog was to produce a career database as a source of reference for fellow students in the polytechnic. This project was a group work and to produce the career blog, the groups were supposed to obtain information from two sources; the first one was through their research on the internet, and the second was through real life interviews with two professionals. All groups were advised to interview individuals who were easily accessible within three weeks, such as people on the polytechnic campus as well as family members. All the information regarding the two professions would be presented in the form of a career blog. All groups were encouraged to choose an appropriate style for their blogs in making sure that the information could be relayed clearly to their intended audience. At the end of the research project, the students were encouraged to share their career blogs with other polytechnic students.

The lessons from the first week and second week were designed to support the students in completing their Multiliteracies Project 1, which was about producing a career blog. The previous lessons promoted necessary skills prevalent in a multiliteracies approach which involved the students in the thinking processes of experiencing, conceptualising, analysing and applying (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). In producing their own career blogs, the students were encouraged to transform their knowledge and practices through their

engagement in the multiliteracies project as recommended by The New London Group's (1996, 2000) transformed practice component of the multiliteracies pedagogy.

The connection between the lessons and the multiliteracies project is summarized in Figure 1.0. Each lesson provided the students with support and necessary information to produce their career blog. The lessons assisted the students to experience and conceptualise appropriate language and communication skills for meeting new people. The purpose was to train and prepare the students with their real encounter with the two professionals. The students also learnt about the forms and functions of developing questions in the English language for example how to form Wh-questions. This was helpful for students to form their interview questions with the two professionals. Finally, the students were engaged in a critical analysis of the current social network websites, in order to help them construct ideas for their own career blogs.

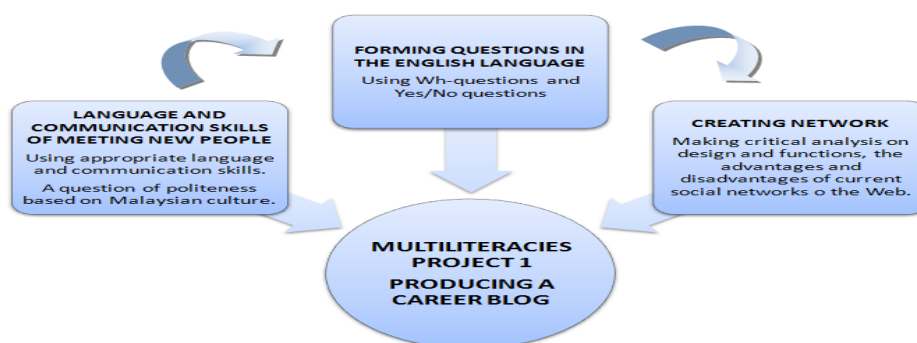


FIGURE 1. The connection between classroom lessons and the multiliteracies project

### DATA COLLECTION METHOD

To ensure the trustworthiness of data in a qualitative research, the data for this research project were collected through multiple channels such as observations, informal conversations, classroom artefacts and professional discussions.

#### OBSERVATION

To understand the lecturers' and students' experiences in their own cultural contexts, data were collected through close observation of the students' experiences in the research project. The research team observed the students' learning experiences during classroom activities and noted all significant events. In addition, the research team also made personal reflections based on their observation of the classroom activities and students' learning experiences. Observation schedule is exemplified in Appendix A.

#### INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

The research team conducted informal conversations with the focus group students at the end of each action research cycles to understand their experiences better as well as to supplement the data from the observations. All informal conversations were carried out in the classroom out of the students' regular classroom hours, with the consent of the students in the focus group. The informal conversations were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia to ensure all students were comfortable in providing answers. The conversations were also recorded using a digital voice recorder. Among the questions asked in these informal conversations were "What do you think about using computers in learning ESL? Do you have any issues in using computers in learning? More questions are illustrated in Appendix B.

#### CLASSROOM ARTEFACTS

In understanding the students' learning, it was also essential to look at classroom artefacts that document the students' work. Cousin (2009) stated that documents are cultural artefacts and would be able to provide relevant data, and in the case of this study, the documents provided data relating to the students' learning experiences. The team collected artefacts that documented the students' classroom tasks, activities and assignments. Among the artefacts collected were the students' written assignments. Samples of classroom artefacts are demonstrated in Appendix C.

#### PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSIONS

Data were collected through professional discussions of the research team. The discussions were conducted regularly throughout the eight weeks of the research project. While engaging in the professional discussions, I took notes on any significant events regarding Siti and Arfah's research experiences. To ensure emotional and interpersonal empowerment (Heron & Reason, 2006), the professional discussions were conducted in informal environment and in an informal manner. Sample questions and discussion topics are illustrated in Appendix B.

#### DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

The audio data was transcribed using a play-script transcription approach (Midgley, 2010) because the current study focussed on what were said by the participants rather than how they said it. Data was then analyzed through Critical Reflective Analysis Steps (Fariza, 2013) which included the process of *observing and noting personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action*. This data analysis method was utilized because participatory action research promotes the interdependence of reflection and action. It is recommended that every reflection on the research process should be followed by practical actions to improve the situation. At the *observing and noting personal reflections* stage, the research team observed students' responses and learning process and made personal reflections on any significant events. Then, at the *confronting and thinking* stage, the research team identified issues rising from the implementation of the multiliteracies approach based on their personal observation and reflections as well as the verbatim transcriptions of informal conversations with the students. The team identified critical points such as the students' responses towards the use of the multiliteracies module and the effectiveness and challenges of the implementation of the module. The team also searched for patterns and potential themes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) which emerged from the reflections to describe how the multiliteracies approach contributed to the students' learning experiences. Finally, at the *taking action* stage, the research team provided solutions to issues identified in the earlier steps and implemented the suggested solutions in the second cycle of the research project.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data shows in implementing a Western pedagogical approach that stressed the importance of critical thinking and higher-order thinking skills in learning, the students had issues in terms of practicing critical thinking and applying knowledge. Among the issues were:

##### AN ISSUE OF WORKING IN TEAMS

It appeared that the students had issues in working collaboratively in a group. Socio-cultural theory states peer collaboration is beneficial towards learning and it was also important in the



21<sup>st</sup> century for the students to be able to work collaboratively with other people as a group. In this research project, the students had no problems engaging in activities that required them to work individually, such as completing comprehension exercises. However, the students seemed to have issues in completing tasks that required them to work in a team. This was evidenced by the research team's observation of classroom activities involving group work. In one instance, we asked the students, in groups of four people, to search for two social networking sites online and provide a critical analysis of those sites based on their usefulness in terms of language, design and function. In the process of forming the groups, the students seemed uncomfortable; however, after a firm encouragement from the teacher, the students managed to form groups. Most groups were formed according to gender, so we had almost all female and all male groups. Only two groups had a mixture of male and female members. During the discussion time, some students were doing the work attentively; however, there were also others especially the male students who were not paying attention. It turned out that only one or two people in the group actually completed the task and the rest of the group members preferred to talk about other things.

In addition, it seemed that the students were also struggling to work in teams while completing their first multiliteracies project, which was to create a career blog. On the presentation day, we asked the students to share with the class the challenges they had faced in completing the first multiliteracies project. Through their *Powerpoint* presentation slides, almost all groups listed "teamwork" as the biggest challenge in completing the task (Classroom artefact, 22 December 2010). The students explained that it was difficult to get every member in the team to be involved in making the project a success. This was also supported by S11 and S12 in the informal conversation shown in Extract 1.1:

**Extract 1.1**

- S11: *In my case, the challenge was to cooperate with each other. We sometimes blame each other for not doing their task.*
- Fariza: *Did you manage to solve the problem?*
- S11: *Yes, by doing all the work myself.*
- Fariza: *The rest?*
- S12: *Doing everything myself is okay, still fine.*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

Extract 1.1 shows that the students had problems in getting cooperation from all group members and as a result they preferred to complete the multiliteracies project on their own. S11 solved teamwork issues by completing the task on his own and S12 commented that it was not a problem for him to complete the task on behalf of his team members.

The multiliteracies approach promotes collaborative learning and it seemed that the students considered working in teams as an obstacle. The students discomfort in working in teams could be caused by their previous classroom practices. It was most probably the end result of a teaching and learning practice that emphasized individual learning. This became evident when students were not able to negotiate teamwork in learning effectively, as shown by findings in the planning stage. Some students mentioned that they were accustomed to learning based on examination practice. For example, S14 stated that "*In secondary school, I studied English language through English textbook. But, I still do composition and summary. Before examination came, my teacher gave a lot of exercises*" (Classroom artefact, 8 December, 2010). This statement shows that the students were accustomed to examination-based approaches and this cultural practice was influencing the way they were negotiating learning using the multiliteracies approach. Usually, in an examination-based learning situation, the students were encouraged to work individually in answering comprehension

questions, mimicking the actual situation of an examination. Because of this the students were not accustomed to working in teams.

Collaborative learning is highly recommended by socio-cultural theory as well as the multiliteracies approach, thus the team felt that we needed to encourage more group work in our future lessons. In order to do that, we decided to be more directive in terms of determining the group dynamics in the second cycle of the research project in contrast to giving the students total freedom in choosing their group members in this cycle. It is important to note that teachers' control is customary in the Malaysian classroom setting and is commonly well accepted. Therefore, firstly, we decided that all groups should have a mix of male and female students. This was because the group dynamics in the first cycle were not effective where the students chose to work in all-male groups and all-female groups. We also decided to put the students in a different social circle, to encourage diversity in terms of perspectives and even thinking skills. Secondly, the number of group members in one group was limited to four people. It was hoped that working in a smaller group would make it easier for the students to work in collaboration towards achieving a similar goal. Data showed that this new group dynamic worked better at the second cycle of the research project and the students worked effectively as a team.

#### **AN ISSUE OF AUTHENTICITY: THE COPY-PASTE CULTURE**

Another issue that the students faced in the multiliteracies classroom was their ability to produce original and authentic work. This point was reflected in the students' final product of their first multiliteracies project. It was found that most of the work or the career blogs presented was a result of a *copy-paste* culture. This term is a colloquial term, and commonly used in Malaysia to refer to the act of plagiarism from the Internet. The word originated from the functions of *copy* and *paste* in *Microsoft Word* program. The 'copy-paste' culture means the act of copying information from the internet and then putting it (using the *paste* function) in another document and claiming it as one's own work.

This 'copy-paste' culture was very obvious in the students' career blog. This was evidenced when the research team browsed the internet for some of the key words in the students' career blogs, and as a result, we found a document that was exactly the same as the students' document in their blog, word for word. For example, Figure 2 shows a caption from a group of students' career blog and Figure 3 shows a caption from a website from the internet - [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_4595768\\_what-qualifications-become-teacher.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_4595768_what-qualifications-become-teacher.html). Figure 2 and 3 show the similarities between the students' career blog's wordings and the website. The similarities in terms of content between Figure 2 and Figure 3 show that the students plagiarized the content of the website and put it in their own blogs without any academic references.

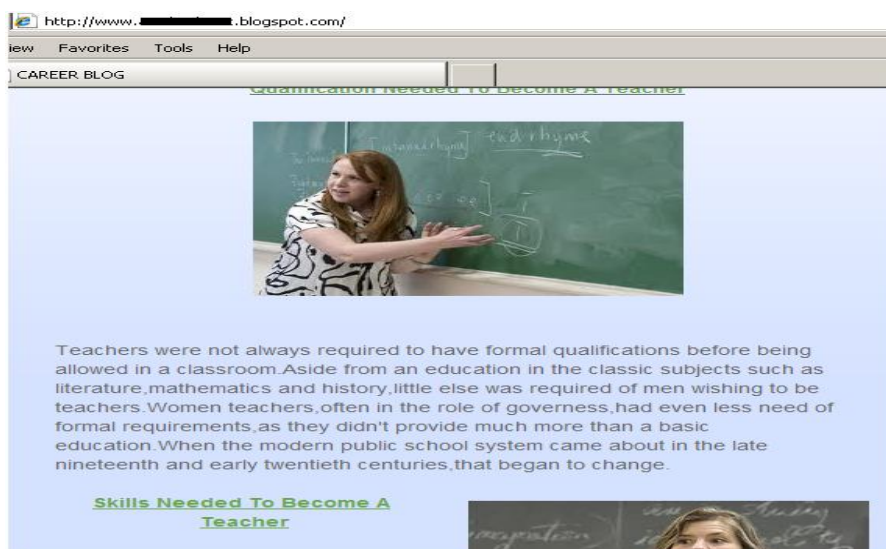


FIGURE 2. An example of a group of students' career blog

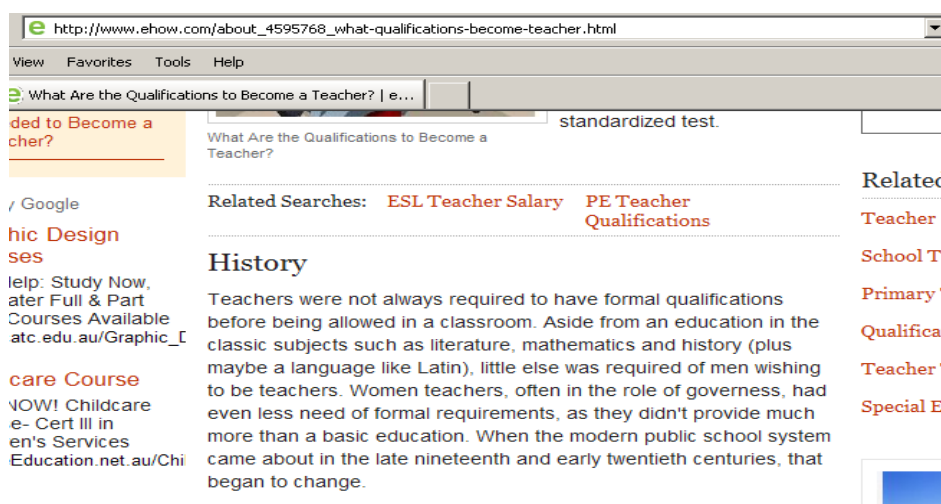


FIGURE 3. The exact wording used in the students' career blog from ehow.com website

The students also admitted that they plagiarised from another website when completing their first multiliteracies project. In an informal conversation, as illustrated in Extract 1.4, they stated that;

**Extract 1.4**

- S6: *Umm, during the first presentations, everyone just read from the screen. And then the content of the blogs was copied directly from the internet.*
- S1: *So, we didn't get what they were saying, because it was not our own words and we just read from the screen.*
- S2: *Yeah, because we 'copy and paste' from the internet,*  
*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

S11 confirmed the point that the students resorted to plagiarism in completing their first assignment, "the first assignment was not a documentary, and then it was hard to do work because we did a lot of copy-paste." Here, to justify his/her action, S11 associated the difficulties of creating a career blog to their action of plagiarising from articles on the Internet.

In addition, during one classroom event, where the students were supposed to conduct a critical analysis of a few social networking websites online, instead of accessing the websites and conducting their own assessment of the functions and features of the websites, the students *googled* the phrase “ *the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook*”. From there the students copied the online articles written by other people and presented them as their own work. Most students did not even go to the websites they had chosen earlier to conduct the critical analysis; instead they relied on their *Google* search to complete the task (Classroom observation, 15 December 2010). This significant event shows that the students were not familiar with activities that required critical analysis, where they were supposed to be critical and practice higher order thinking skills such as analysing and evaluating.

The team concluded that the issue of authenticity was also an end result of the students’ cultural learning background. Students who were from the Malaysian learning background were familiar with the concept of prescriptive learning, where the teachers became the primary source of knowledge and theories, and the students absorbed all of the information like a sponge. In this prescriptive learning environment, students were not taught to be critical. They were more subservient and passive receivers of information. In addition, perhaps the students were also not used to using technology in learning and thus contributed to their inability to participate in the multiliteracies approach activities that require them to apply critical thinking skills. In a study conducted by Thang et al. (2014) that investigated the patterns of the use of technology in learning ESL among some Malaysian students shows that the students use technological tools more for social and recreational purposes rather than academic purposes. In our research project, the students were able to use the Internet to obtain information but were not able to participate in learning activities that promoted critical thinking. During the critical analysis activities students were not able to think critically or even produce original work.

We viewed the *copy-paste* culture as a major problem because it was against the foundation of a multiliteracies approach, where students were supposed to use knowledge processes such as conceptualising, experiencing, analysing and applying (Kalantzis and Cope, 2004) that are deemed necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning contexts. To solve this issue, the team decided to use the students’ cultural learning background to the advantage of the implementation of the multiliteracies approach. Instead of enforcing a new learning practice upon the students, it was better for us to incorporate their cultural learning background, which emphasized examination-based learning activities, together with the foundations of the multiliteracies approach. As a result, we decided to make our lessons more prescriptive.

Every task was to be explained in greater details and explained thoroughly according to order. Basically, we planned to have a step-by-step printed guideline on how to complete the task. Data showed that these steps facilitated students in understanding the task better and the students were able to produce original work. In addition, to encourage critical thinking among students, the team suggested having more activities that required the students to share and discuss certain topics and issues with their friends and teachers in the following cycle. Data showed that through these discussions, students would have diverse perspectives on the issues being discussed and this would help to promote critical thinking.

#### **A QUESTION OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN DESIGNING THEIR OWN LEARNING**

It appears that the concept of active participation was not well-accepted by the students in our initial attempt of implementing multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning context. Extract 1.5 shows that the students were not used to giving or sharing their opinions with their teachers. S10 stated that he never gives suggestions to his teachers and S12 viewed the

practice as something to be feared. It seemed that the concept of active participation was still foreign to the students because it was not a standard practice in Malaysian classrooms.

**Extract 1.5**

- Fariza: *Are you comfortable with giving suggestions to your lecturers about the direction of your learning process?*  
*Silent.*
- S10: *We will know if we do it (laughs).*
- S12: *No. I am afraid*
- Fariza: *Why are you afraid?*
- S12: *Because I never do it before.*
- Fariza: *So, you have never done this?*
- S12: *Yes.*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

Data showed that the students had problems in expressing their opinions and sharing with their teachers their views on matters related to their learning. This point was illustrated from our first informal conversation in order to get personal insights into the students' initial experiences in learning the English language using the multiliteracies approach. It was interesting to see that most of the students were uncomfortable answering our questions. Most students remained silent and others who actually spoke did not elaborate their answers. For example, when asked to share their opinion regarding their learning experiences in a classroom that uses the multiliteracies approach, the students gave one-word answers and some actually refused to answer the question entirely. As researchers, we kept on encouraging them to speak by stating that their answers were not evaluated and the discussion was not an examination of their abilities in any way. However, it was not successful. Extract 1.6 illustrated this point:

**Extract 1.6**

- Fariza: *How about the rest of you, do you have anything else to say on this topic?*  
*Silent*
- Fariza: *Nothing?*  
*Silent (with a few nods from a few students).*
- Fariza: *It is okay, you can talk to me. This is just an informal conversation, not a test, so I welcome your opinions.*
- S8: *Umm, (silent)*
- Fariza: *I am not judging you in any way. There is no judgement and no evaluation. Just a friendly chat.*  
*Silent*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

Extract 1.7 also shows another instance of the point mentioned above. It was quite obvious that the students were uncomfortable in expressing their opinions especially about their teaching and learning experiences. The students remained silent on the topic of using videos as opposed to using print-based materials in classroom learning. S8 said "yes" but did not elaborate and the rest of the group nodded to show agreement with S8's statement.

**Extract 1.7**

- Fariza: *So you are more comfortable having videos rather than print materials in the classroom?*
- S8: *Yes.*
- Fariza: *How about the rest of you, do you have anything to say on this matter?*  
*Silent*
- Fariza: *Nothing?*  
*Silent ( with a few nods from a few students)*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

Extract 1.8 shows that S5 preferred the teacher to make all the decisions in terms of their teaching and learning rather than the students themselves giving opinions on the matter

(Informal conversation, 20 December 2010). This was because, according to her, the teachers would know what was best for the students and it was not necessary for students to give more suggestions. In addition, S15 in a classroom artefact (8 December 2010) shared S5's view where she stated "I think it not very important because lecturer know what they teach student. They refer to the Ministry of Higher Education." To the students, the teachers were experts in their area and suggestions from students were not necessary. The thread of conversation shows that some students, at this point, were not ready to contribute to the development of their own learning through sharing their views and opinions with their teachers.

**Extract 1.8**

Arfah: *What do you think about giving suggestions to your teachers about matters related to your own learning?*

S5: *I think it was not necessary for students to give opinions to their teachers.*

Arfah: *Even though about your own learning?*

S5: *Yes. I think the teachers know better than the students.*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

It seemed that the students were not familiar with the concept of active participation in designing their own learning. The research team thought that the cultural classroom practices that stressed on examination success probably contributed to this issue (Professional discussion, 24 December 2010). Due to limited practice in listening and speaking skills activities in the examination-based learning background, the students were familiar with giving or writing their answers on paper and they seemed uncomfortable in expressing their opinions verbally. In an examination-based context, where right and wrong answers were very crucial, perhaps the students were worried about giving the wrong answer. Since the students were not comfortable in sharing their opinions verbally, we decided to use a genre that the students were all familiar with in an examination-based context, which was the writing genre. We decided to use an alternative where students would express their views and opinions about their own learning in a series of reaction papers throughout the research project. These papers would be a more suitable outlet for students to express their views and opinions in writing.

The research team also felt that the students were reluctant to express their opinions due to the complex cultural influence that surround the teacher-student relationship in the Malaysian context. Firstly, the teacher-student relationship is based on a hierarchical structure. The Malay society view teachers as leaders in the classroom context, and the Malays materialized respect to leaders via loyalty and obedience (Hashim et al., 2012). Due to this, students, being at the bottom part of the structure, are usually obligated to show respect to the teachers who are at a superior place in the hierarchical structure. Secondly, teachers are usually older than the students and according to the Malaysian culture it is not appropriate to speak up to the elders. The students' reluctance in expressing their opinions in the above instances, therefore, could actually be understood as a sign of respect towards their teachers (Aminuddin et al., 2010; Novera, 2004; Yong, 2010). Thirdly, the Malaysian community also put importance on the concept of face value and maintaining harmonious relationships among the community members. Perhaps, the students were fearful to express their opinions because they were worried that the teachers would be offended and this would disturb the harmonious relationships between teachers and students. Finally, teachers in a Malaysian community are often considered as the main source of knowledge and experts

(Aminuddin et al., 2010), thus most probably the students felt that it was not necessary to challenge the teachers' knowledge.

The complex relationship between teachers and students in Malaysian contexts defined the relationship that we have with our students and we decided to incorporate a step by step active participation from students in our lessons. The main issue to tackle was to bridge the gap between teachers and students. In order to do this, the team suggested having more informal conversations with the students during class time. This was necessary to build good relationships and rapport with the students thus making the students feel more comfortable in expressing their opinions. It was hoped that by building good rapport with the students, the teachers would be able to bridge the culturally-determined gap between teachers and students and make the students feel closer to the teachers. Data showed that through these efforts, the students would be more willing to share ideas and opinions especially about their teaching and learning processes.

### **REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION**

This study showed that implementing a Western-based pedagogy in a Malaysian context can be challenging because of the differences in cultural learning and practices. The findings showed that the students, who were accustomed to learning English as a Second Language (ESL) using textbooks and examination question practices (Fariza, 2013), faced challenges when learning using a multiliteracies approach. Firstly, it seemed that the students had limited knowledge in using multimodal resources that includes the combination of print, audio and visual texts as represented by new communication channels such as websites, blogs and social media for learning as most students plagiarized from the Internet to complete their multiliteracies assignments. Secondly, the students demonstrated that they were struggling in negotiating 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as critical thinking, peer-collaborative works, and collaborative participation in designing classroom learning.

This study is significant to the literature on teaching and learning universally as it shows that students' socio-cultural attributes determines their responses towards a new learning approach. The current study shows that the formal and distanced teacher-student relationship in Malaysian culture inhibited the students from actively participating in the collaborative participation with teachers. The students withdrew from giving constructive comments towards their learning as they saw the teacher as someone who is more knowledgeable and whose decision should be respected. This point was also discussed by Thanh-Pham (2011) when he implemented Western-based learner-centred learning activities in a Vietnam learning setting. He stated that in implementing a Western-based learning approach in an environment where teachers and student participants did not see learner-centred approaches as better than their traditional classroom practices was challenging. The participants of his study still valued traditional practices, which was examination-based learning and teacher-centred approaches. Thanh-Pham stated that that consideration of these cultures should be made before implementing learner-centred approaches in Vietnam.

This study is also significant to the literature on teaching and learning as it attested that cultural consideration is imperative in the implementation of a new pedagogy in any learning setting (Ha, 2004; Manikutty, Anuradha, & Hansen, 2007; Pratt, 2002). The current study shows that due to the examination-oriented culture, the students had issues in engaging in critical thinking activities. They were used to answering examination questions and were not familiar with activities that require them to be critical. In addition, the students were used to individual learning that focussed on answering the examination questions and rarely involved collaborative work among peers, and that contributed to their poor collaboration among group members. The significance of culture in implementing a new approach in a

particular learning context was also discussed by Tan and Guo (2010). Tan and Guo (2010) investigated the experiences of a Singaporean teacher in implementing a multiliteracies approach in a Singaporean learning context where learning was still based on print literacies. Although the students were showing evidence of new literacies learning, the teacher expressed that it was quite challenging to implement the multiliteracies approach in Singaporean learning contexts as the emphasis on using multiple literacies contradicted the focus of the national assessment that was still based on print literacies. The teacher was interested to use a multiliteracies approach in her classroom and she also acknowledged the importance of learning 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, but she faced a dilemma because the national examination, which is highly valued by Singaporean society, was still concentrating on print literacies.

The implication of the study towards the Malaysian learning setting is an explicit guideline to create a contextualized multiliteracies approach that would best fit the Malaysian learning context. It is important to consider and take into account the influence of the students' examination-based learning and practices towards their learning in implementing a Western-based pedagogy in a Malaysian context. The points to be considered are:

1. The provision of more guidance and information from the teachers by providing detailed descriptions of all tasks and learning activities;
2. a reduction in the status gap between teachers and students through having more informal and casual interactions between them;
3. the encouragement of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills among students through engagement with critical thinking activities, the use of multimodal resources and technologies, peer-collaborative tasks, and active participation in designing own learning.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that while the implementation of a Western-based teaching approach such as the multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian context benefits some aspects of the students' learning, it could also sometimes cause mismatch between the skills needed and the local socio-cultural context. The process of implementing a Western pedagogy in a Malaysian learning context requires deep deliberation and consideration of the students' socio cultural practices and cultures of learning to ensure that optimum result could be achieved from the introduction of the new pedagogy. The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge on teaching and learning as they give a new perspective to the implementation of multiliteracies approach. Our multiliteracies approach now is not only about providing a new learning environment or creating a new learning approach, but also about understanding how a society view the world and how it shaped the way they negotiated learning.

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## APPENDIX A

OBSERVATIONAL SCHEDULE	
Setting: Observer: Time/Date: Length of observation: Lesson:	
Students' engagement to the new ways of learning – overt instruction, situated practice, critical framing , transformed practice	
Students responses towards the use of semiotic resources, scaffolding, the concept of agency, and Involvement with their social surroundings.	
Students' interaction with each other and with the teacher	
Use of specific language	
Critical incident	

## APPENDIX B

### Sample of interview questions and discussion topics.

#### Students

##### *Past language learning experiences (before the research project)*

- Can you please share with me your experiences in learning English before this?
- Can you describe your typical English language classroom scenario?
- What do you think of the mentioned approaches?
- How do you feel when you use the mentioned approaches?
- What are your goals and expectations for an English class?
- What do you think is the elements needed in an English language classroom that would impact your language learning? Can you explain why?

##### *Multiliteracies approach in ESL classroom (discussion topics for informal conversations)*

- The use of a variety of text types in the English classroom for example audio and visual text.
- The benefits and challenges of using computer, Internet and mobile phones in learning English.
- The benefits of teacher's explanation in the classroom.
- The benefits of classroom activities in preparing students for the multiliteracies project.
- The benefits of students' active participation in determining their own learning.
- The benefits of dialogues between teachers and students.
- The benefits and challenges in participating in real-life situation projects.
  - Language learning.
  - multiliteracies skills acquisition.
- The effectiveness of the learning module.
- Suggestions to improve the learning module.

#### Teachers/ co-researchers

##### *Past classroom practices (before the research project)*

- Can you please share with me your experiences in teaching English before this?
- Can you describe your typical English language classroom scenario?
- What do you think of the mentioned approaches?
- How do you feel when you use the mentioned approaches?
- What are your goals and expectations for an English class?
- What do you think about using technologies in your teaching? Why?
- What kinds of technology that you usually use in your teaching?
- Do you give assignments to students? Can you please describe your typical assignment?

*Multiliteracies approach in ESL classroom (discussion topics for the professional conversations between the researcher and the teachers/co-researchers during the research project)*

- Students' responses towards the new learning module.
- Students' responses towards the use of semiotic resources which includes multimodal texts.
- Students' responses towards scaffolding activities.
- Students' responses towards the concept of agency in language learning.
- Students' responses towards their involvement with their social surroundings and real life community.
- Students' engagement and language use in the classroom.
- Students' commitment to classroom tasks and multiliteracies projects.
- Benefits of using the learning module to the students.
- The use of technology in teaching.
- Benefits and challenges in implementing the learning module.
- Students' suggestions and opinions regarding the learning module.
- Suggestions for improvement of the learning module.

*PAR's contribution to the teachers' professional development (during the research project)*

- Do you think that the project is successful? Why or why not?
- Do you think that the students benefit from this approach? How?
- Would you use this approach in your teachings later on? Why or why not?
- What have you learned from your participation in this research project?
- What do you think about the collaborative work and shared decision making that you have experienced in this research project? Why?
- In your opinion, is it important for teachers to study their own teaching practice? Why?
- Throughout the research project, we considered the students opinions and suggestions in determining the course of the learning module. What do you think about this?
- How does students' reflection and feedback help you as a teacher?
- How does this experience change you as a teacher?
- How does this experience change your views?

## APPENDIX C

### SAMPLES OF CLASSROOM ARTEFACTS

#### Sample of classroom reaction paper

Q1. Can you describe your usual English language classroom scenario before this?

In my class room, all of my classmate speaking in Malay Language included my teacher. some times, we speak in English Language. When my teacher starting teaching us, all of people sitting quietly and hearing what my teacher speak.

Q2. What do you think of the mentioned approaches ( the one you mentioned in Q1)? Do you think that the approach assisted you to learn English better?

In my opinion, not <sup>A+</sup> all I can learn easily. Because sometimes I can't catchy what my teacher teach me. But, when my English Language class have finished, I meet my teacher and ask about what we learn in that class.

Q3. What are your goals and expectations for an English class? Do you require the use of any specific methods? Can you give examples and reasons for your answers.

A goal is to get 'B' in my SPM. And I has reach my goal. I didn't use

#### Samples of career blog produced

www.██████████.blogspot.com

Collect, identify, classify, and analyze physical evidence related to criminal investigations. Perform tests on weapons or substances, such as fiber, hair, and issue to determine significance to investigation. May testify as expert witnesses in evidence or crime laboratory techniques. May serve as specialists in area of expertise, such as ballistics, fingerprinting, handwriting, or biochemistry.

### How Does A Day Of Forensic Scientist Goes On

On typical day a forensic science technician might perfoeme some of the following duties:



- examine, test and analyze tissue samples, chemical substances, physical materials and ballistics evidence using recording, measuring and testing equipment.
- interpret laboratory findings and test results to identify and classify substances, materials and other evidence collected at crime scene.
- collect and preserve criminal evidence used to solve cases.
- confer with ballistics, fingerprinting, handwriting, documents, electronics, medical, chemical or metallurgical experts concerning evidence and its interpretation.
- reconstruct crime scene to determine relationships among pieces of evidence.
- prepare reports or presentations of findings, investigative methods or laboratory techniques



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