

Examining Classroom Transformational Spaces Using the Third Space Theory in Developing Students' Sense of Shared Identity

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Abstract—This article reports the investigation that seeks to address the possibility of using selected texts in the English language classrooms that could develop students' sense of shared identity. In so doing, this study attempts to examine perceptions of teachers and students about classroom collaborations between students-student and student-teacher using case-based narratives which was selected by teachers. It also seeks to identify how their collaborative acts can be suggestive to transforming a linear classroom lesson to a more vibrant and effective one and simultaneously develop students sense of shared identity. A qualitative inquiry employing semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and group interviews with 12 secondary English language school teachers and their students were conducted. Teachers' classroom practices (and instructions) are then analysed to gauge their impact on students' interactions with each other during task completion. The preliminary results indicate that teachers' were reluctant to relinquish their authority and power to students for various reasons which could be detrimental to the construction of shared identity. Teachers, more than students felt that their authoritative figure were one of the key indicators of classroom progress in a result-driven education system. The results obtained aim to be informative in pointing to the viability of providing avenues for syllabus designers or other stakeholders to take into considerations texts types which could be used for secondary schools English Literature syllabus in developing students sense of shared identity. Meanwhile, it is also found that students' sense of shared identity could be halted without teachers' support and encouragement of these transformational learning spaces.

Index Terms—shared identity, transformational learning spaces, teacher-student collaboration, narrative inquiry, classroom interactions, Third Space theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Students are constructed agents in the classroom should they be given the chance to do so. However, in the exam oriented, result-driven education system such as the one in Malaysia; more often than not, students have very little say in classroom transactions. With the federal government's effort to bond all races with its 1Malaysia concept, the fundamental aspect which is the curricula was almost neglected or sidelined. This study in an attempt to contribute to the aspects of unity in diversity, seeks to look at the English Literature texts for the secondary schools in Malaysia and obtain teachers and students' perceptions of their classrooms transactions whilst working on the pre-selected text suggested by the researcher.

Research Questions

This investigation seeks to answer two main research questions:

1. To what extent do teachers feel the need to provide 'spaces' in developing student sense of shared identity in the classroom?

2a. What are students' perceptions working on local-based texts selected by their teachers?

2b. How do teachers and students respond to the idea of using case-based narratives in transforming classroom traditional spaces to develop students' sense of shared identity?

In order to answer these research questions, teachers' perceptions of their students' classroom interactions while studying selected Malaysian short stories are sought; students' perceptions of their engagement with their peers and the texts selected by their teachers in their literature lessons are also explored. In addition, interactions via discursive engagement in the Third Space in a hybrid multicultural classroom between teacher-student and student-student are also examined.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: THIRD SPACE AS TRANSFORMATIONAL SPACES

'Third Spaces are hybrid spaces that bring people together' (Bhabha, 2004). It is a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory of identity and community realized through language enunciation. Bhabha explains that Third Space theory describes the uniqueness of each person, actor or context as 'hybrid'. Thus, in the present study, the hybrid spaces are not only the availability of groups of students from different cultural backgrounds in what could be conceived as

'convenient hybridity' in the classroom, but also the active introduction of Malaysian short stories which can be perceived as induced hybridity, in the integration and amalgamation of knowledge from the official and unofficial curriculum. The official curriculum (text used) in this context is the prescribed texts used by all the students in Malaysia, while the unofficial text is the one selected by the researcher. Convenient hybridity mentioned above carries the meaning of the readily available multicultural students in a classroom. In this study, students from different backgrounds are not taken from several schools but are all in one single school. This aspect of convenient hybridity is akin to the convenience sampling technique when carrying out research. Induced hybridity, on the other hand, is the 'planned' hybridity in which the Malaysian short story selected by the researcher is used. The induced hybridity is to optimise responses from the participants, so 'familiar ground' (a Malaysian story) is chosen to induce reciprocity.

Other education-based studies which utilise the concept of Third Space include the work of Pane (2007). In her study, Pane investigated how the blend between face-to-face and online instruction supports the development of Third Space content-area in a reading education course. She identifies the Third Space in her study as a 'zone of transformation' that is generated when teachers and students socialise together in and through language, integrating everyday and academic knowledge. Similar to the context of teaching and learning derived from Pane, the Third Space in this study is identified as an area (zone) where students and teachers explore the Malaysian short story and link the story to their everyday experiences of 'reality' in society. With the ability to link stories to reality (the favourable and unfavourable events happening in society), teachers may also be able to facilitate the construction of shared identity by getting the students to critically reflect on their own experiences in a direction which recognises the importance of unity amidst their differences.

In tune with the concern to recognise differences, Kostogriz (2002), by contrast, asserts that the Third Space is not about finding a solution to differences or searching for familiar ground in literacy representations and practices. He contends that the main purpose is for students to be aware of contradictions and ambivalence and their acceptance of situations where ambivalence could help in their learning and also their lives. By this he means that the students would be able to understand conflicts more readily in their lives from being aware of the differences that exist amongst themselves. His perspective fits well with the intention of this study in that by understanding cultural conflicts, students can develop the notion of shared identity in a more sensible way.

Gutiérrez and her associate (1999) have a slightly different perspective to that of Bhabha on Third Space. They perceive the Third Space as a link between community/home-based Discourse and school-based Discourse (Moje et al., 2004). However, Gutiérrez in her more recent study of the Third Space proposes that a paradigm shift is needed in literacy education for young people in which the collective Third Space and 'sociocritical literacy' (Gutiérrez, 2008) are emphasised. Sociocritical literacy, according to Gutiérrez (Ibid: 148):

...historicizes everyday and institutional literacy practices and texts and reframes them as powerful tools oriented toward critical social thought.

In her study, students in their everyday social environment re-examine who they are and what their potential could be to enable them to achieve academically and beyond. In other words, students are encouraged to critically re-conceive their 'self' and the 'others' around them. Gutiérrez focuses on the design of a particular social environment of development (learning ecology) in which the construct of a collective Third Space is developed. She contends that the construct of this Third Space is very much akin to that of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Gutiérrez's perspective in this sociocritical view of literacy, however, challenges contemporary definitions of the Zone of Proximal Development in which Vygotsky's (1978) construct of ZPD is at the heart of scaffolding. In ZPD, learners are given support by their teacher or a more competent peer until the learner decides the support is no longer required. Gutiérrez's notion of ZPD is conceptualised in the Third Space from three different aspects. First, the Third Space is a 'movement' in which the reorganisation of school-based concepts takes place. Second, the main activities suitable to learners' development reorganise everyday functions in this Third Space, and finally, the development in this Third Space is grounded as the transformation of the individual learner (Gutiérrez, 2008). From her perspective, Gutiérrez believes that learners' development and their sociocultural environment '*actively seek to change the other to their own ends*' (p.153). This is Gutiérrez's point of departure from ZPD.

To this end, Gutiérrez's work resonates with the focus of this study, insofar as firstly, there is a reorganisation of 'movement' in terms of the utilisation of the Malaysian short story in the literature classroom. The 'movement' resembles the progression from the official text prescribed in the syllabus to the unofficial texts (a Malaysian short story). Then there are the main activities which constitute teaching and learning in the classroom, similar to the day-to-day literature lessons but comprising carefully orchestrated (planned) participation. Thirdly, there is the development in the Third Space which Gutiérrez cites as the transformation of the individual learner through carefully designed, ecologically-grounded practice. However, Gutiérrez's call for learners and their sociocultural environment to actively seek to change the other to their own ends is not applicable to this study as the main aim of this investigation is for the students to understand the other not 'to change' them. Teachers and learners and their sociocultural environment in this case actively use their understanding of difference (of self and other) to aid the formation of a shared identity.

The advantages of exploiting the Third Space

Scholars in the realms of Third Space have highlighted the potential of exploiting this space. Gutiérrez and her colleagues (1999) state that the construct of Third Space has been advantageous in helping educators to understand the

complexity of learning environments and their transformative potential – *‘Hybridity in diversity serve as the building blocks of Third Space’* (p.287). By this they mean that the careful use of hybridity and diversity permits the transformation of activities into becoming a strong developmental context in which students can learn.

In their 2004 study, Moje and colleagues go on to show that by connecting marginalised and conventional knowledge, there is an increase in academic engagement when the Third Space is utilised in the classroom context. Secondly, the Third Space serves as a ‘navigational’ space where students are able to bring resources from home to the classroom context. In this way, learners are able to take advantage of the different resources they bring to the classroom to support their abilities to operate in different contexts by drawing upon the different skills learned in different situations. Thirdly, the Third Space provides a place where the integration of resources from home (experience) and school Discourses produce new learning patterns. This space is characterised by the Discourses and roles adopted by the actors (the teachers, students, parents and community) within them and generates new knowledge which can sometimes challenge their sense-making of the subject in relation to the knowledge generated from home and the world outside the classroom. Moje et al (2004, p.44) suggest that:

The few studies of classroom practices that seek to challenge dominant knowledge and Discourses generally demonstrate gains in students’ academic literacy skills because of the bridges that are built even as students move toward developing new knowledge.

Thus, Moje and associates urge the need for more studies of the Third Space in the classroom context using a variety of methods in which every day and academic Discourses can be challenged and new knowledge produced.

Wolf (2008) delineates several advantages to be gained from the exploration of the Third Space, and suggests that the Third Space should not be seen just as a ‘space’ but rather as a contact zone for controversial potentials, a space for transition that helps make visible *‘the idea of something incompatible, concealed, unconscious’*(p.13). This space of transition could be one that has long been avoided by teachers (and family members or society) such as discussions of controversial issues including ethnic stereotyping and the ‘privileges’ awarded to certain groups of people by those with ‘power’ vested in them. The controversial potential is what Bhabha (1994, p.39) refers to when he says *‘Self can be experienced as the Other’*. In the literature-teaching context in this study, what Bhabha indicated in the quotation above can be interpreted as the role play students create and present to the class - ‘them’ in the shoes of the characters they carry. Thus, the Third Space is a space of transition to being ‘them’ to becoming someone else, from the narrative used. As a consequence of the Third Space as a space of transition, Wolf points out that it can be a platform for negotiation, and in this study negotiation between students and other students and also students and their teacher. The Third Space is an interactive arena where conflicts and differences between students can be transposed into constructive features.

The Third Space as described in the studies mentioned above fits very well with the aims and objectives of the present study - using Malaysian a short story so that students and teachers alike can share their home experiences with the others in the classroom. These different experiences not only heighten their knowledge about the other cultures around them but also of the complexity of ‘reality’ in society, which can then strengthen the drive to construct a shared Malaysian identity. The Third Space as a hybrid space can open up avenues and broaden access for the students to renegotiate their identities, thus taking steps beyond their normal unitary ‘fixed’ identities (as Malays, Chinese or Indians) to a hybridised space that is negotiable and fluid.

Locating the Third space

Luke and Luke (1999,p.234) conceptualising the Third Space, assert:

The third space is the site and moment of hybridity, of ambivalence, or reworking and renaming, of subverting and recreating identity from among multi-embedded social constructions of Otherness. These constructs are not exclusively the representations of the dominant culture, but intertwine with community, family, or nation narratives that index ‘home’, ‘race’, ‘origin’ and ‘culture’.

Therefore, the concept of the ‘Third Space’ has considerable ramifications for the possible construction of shared identity in a space where cultures collide and beliefs and values can tend to contradict each other. As highlighted by Luke and Luke above, the hybrid space is where re-identification or reformulation can occur without the superiority of the dominant culture. In the context of this study, this is the culture of the Malays. It offers the possibility of cultural politics whereby polarities between different ethnicities can be avoided. It is not a halfway space but, rather, centred on the adaptation and transformation of the culture and identity of a society that attempts to reconcile differences. Meredith (1998) affirms:

The concept of hybridity and the third space contributes to an approach that avoids the perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms and develops inclusionary, not exclusionary, and multi-faceted, not dualistic, patterns of cultural exchange and maturation.

Thus, the ultimate goal in locating the Third Space in this study, following Gutiérrez, is to create rich zones of development (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). In this sphere, students learn collaboratively by participating in activities through which they share ideas, materials, experience, language and also their cultural resources.

The notion of hybridity is exemplified in the use of local narratives (a Malaysian short story), proposed as the mediating tool for the construction of shared Malaysian identity. This notion of hybridity according to Moje et al. (2004) can be applied to the integration of competing knowledge and discourses. By this they mean:

[...] to the texts one reads and writes; to the spaces, contexts, and relationships one encounters; and even to a person's identity enactments and sense of self. Hybridity theory connects in important ways to Third Space, because Third Spaces are hybrid spaces that bring together any or all of the constructs named above.

The constructs, as they are referred to by Moje and colleagues above, require collaborative participation (Oxford, 1997) from the actors (text, space and context). Fundamental to the idea of collaborative participation is the conception of hybridity which is a crucial element in knowledge generation in the Third Space.

Moje et al. (2004:43) further argue that the Third Space can become an effective hybrid cultural space under certain conditions:

...rather than a fragmented and angst-ridden psychological space, only if teachers and students incorporate divergent texts in the hope of generating new knowledge and Discourses.

Accordingly, the use of a Malaysian short story in this study (unofficial texts) fits the purpose of creating a Third Space in the literature classroom where not only new knowledge can be produced but also the awareness of the need to construct an identity that is responsive to the development of a more integrated society.

Constructing the Third Space in the classroom

The Third Space is a theoretical construct which emerged out of the data analysis. From the data, it emerged that students and teachers were positive about the different ideas that could be introduced in their teaching and learning. In addition, according to the literature, the understanding which takes place through sharing experiences through dialogues of argumentation, negotiation and explanation can strengthen the foundation of knowledge generation (Wells, 2000). I realised that these new ideas could benefit students' learning if teachers were aware of ways in which the Third Space can be a transformational space for teaching and learning, and that if the Third Space was beneficially exploited, any new curriculum ideas could be introduced without having to adhere to a prescribed official syllabus, at the same time attaining the intended learning outcomes and still getting students to work towards their examination objectives.

In the discussion of hybridity and the Third Space, I have drawn upon concepts from Moje et al.'s (2004) study based on hybridity theory. These authors assert that '*people in any given community draw on multiple resources or funds to make sense of the world*' and that being '*in-between several different funds of knowledge and Discourse can be productive and constraining in terms of one's literate, social, and cultural practices*' (p. 42). The findings in this present study indicated that students only drew on their home and community experiences and knowledge during their lessons, if the teachers gave explicit instructions to do so when using the Malaysian short story, so that they were able to link and connect their own experiences to the problems and conflicts presented in the story. However, from the observations, students often seemed detached from the content of lessons in that they were not able to bring their home or community experiences into the classroom as there was very little opportunity to do so and no attempt or guidance from the teachers to encourage them. This suggests that there could be value in explaining the relevance of this Third Space in the classroom to teachers by indicating its parameters and boundaries and ways in which it can become a medium for the construction of collective identity.

In explaining the relevance of the Third Space as a medium of shared identity construction, a possible framework could involve three applications following Hulme, Cracknell and Owens (2009): a **recognised space** in which students and teachers can negotiate their learning and teaching; an **excursion space** where the space is used to travel into their designated lesson activities such as in the forms of role-play, drama, dialogues and a **transmission space** in which communication, information and correspondence are exchanged.

Ideally, activities based on all three modes can be planned as 'excursions into learning' whereby messages and values are translated into role-play, drama and dialogues between and amongst the students as well as in teacher-student interactions. Finally, messages that are translated through excursions (drama, role-play, dialogue) can be transmitted to the rest of the class so that information can be exchanged and communication reciprocated. Through the course of these transactions, the Third Space can actively serve as a platform for the students to construct collective identity through their heightened knowledge and awareness of 'others' around them.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative inquiry employing the semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers from six different schools around Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, focus groups discussion with 6 groups of students and pre and post non-participant classroom observations were carried out. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted in the analysis of data.

Selected Text and Workshop

Deep Fried Devils by Shih Li-Kow, a Malaysian writer. It depicted a story of how a Chinese couple had arguments with a Malay couple. Both were hawkers and sold similar delicacy. They pointed fingers at who stole whose delicacies. At the same time, another hawker (immigrants) put up their stall and sold the same food. Realising that both of them were at a losing end, they stood united.

During the Pre-workshop observations, teachers taught using the prescribed text issued by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. Teachers attended a workshop meant to introduce the text Deep Fried Devils and possible ways in using it. Teachers were given the opportunity to exploit the text anyway they pleased during post-workshop observation.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Transforming Classroom Spaces into Shared Space

Autonomy in the classroom

One important aspect in the investigation of the different perceptions of teachers and students in this study is around the degree to which students were given control over their own learning activities. Some teachers felt they had given some autonomy to the students in their decision making in group work formation; however, several students tended to disagree. From the analysis, students' decision making about group formation was more often than not overruled by their teachers, if the teachers felt that the combination of group members did not match the lesson objectives. In addition, most students were observed to have had minimal negotiations with their teachers regarding group formation. The implication is that the differences in teachers' and students' perceptions can probably indicate differing purposes in group work formation. Whilst teachers were mostly prepared for completing the syllabus and gearing students for examinations, students, on the other hand, demonstrated their eagerness to have their own 'voices' heard in classroom processes of decision making. Thus, teachers' openness to other voices is crucial for laying the foundations for the success of multi-ethnic group work, fostering 1Malaysia and paving a pathway for a tangible use of the Third Space construct.

In relation to the issue of autonomy discussed above, firstly, some students were seen to demand from their teachers more 'voice' and decision making in their quest for task completion such as when selecting group members. I asked teachers to comment on this issue.. RA had this to say:

There are not many Chinese and Indians [in the classroom]. So, if there happened to be more [Chinese and Indians], then I think they would probably choose their own kind...easier to communicate, may be. But I will always emphasise in using the English Language in my classroom. (RA 95)

[] indicates my additions)

Another comment akin to RA's comment came from SN:

Sometimes if you give them the freedom, the students will find their own friends from their own race. But then again the majority are Malay. So the tendency of having more Malay students cannot be avoided. (SN37)

FN made a similar comment:

I give the freedom for the students to choose. I noticed sometimes the students like to stick to their own race. (FN26)

Secondly, in contrast to some students' contrary opinions, teachers were explicit about what students had to learn and how it should be learnt. Teachers and students have different ways of interpreting and making sense of 'autonomy'. Benson (2007) states that, by and large, teachers view autonomy essentially as related to classroom learning arrangements and that this falls within what has been indicated in the syllabus. This goes hand in hand with what most teachers in this study generally believed: that they (teachers) should determine the plan for teaching and learning, not the students. Some students felt that a degree of student autonomy in decision making about classroom learning would enable them to better communicate their ideas, by selecting group members for collaborative problem-solving tasks.

Little (2007:16) asserts that '*the essence of learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning*'. However, Chan (2000) attests to the notion that it is problematic for teachers to have room for learner autonomy in exam-driven contexts such as Malaysia, where the classroom teaching and learning is run '*in a formal and structured manner*' (p.78). From my observations, it seems that there was little learning autonomy (i.e. choices for students) in any other aspect of classroom learning such as self-assessment, goal-setting and self-reflection (although these aspects of learning were not directly within the scope of this investigation).

Common things shared with friends from different cultural backgrounds

The idea of food (as discussed in the text *Deep Fries Devils*) as a unifying factor is ubiquitous. Food, according to Phillips, (2006) has long functioned as a commodity in global production and trade systems in that the idea of globalisation itself has been cultivated through food. In the process of looking for the combination of ingredients which could make up the elements of a shared Malaysian identity, I asked the students to discuss the things they had and would share with everyone despite their differences in culture, language and religious backgrounds. The discussion about this issue was exhilarating and amusing as they shared their experiences and also contributed some new ideas about things which could be shared by the people of this country.

The most common idea the group members suggested was the gastronomy, which play a crucial part in Malaysian people's lifestyles. To reiterate, a lot of activities revolve around food. Food is considered one of the most important elements of being Malaysian as a large number of people would look for something to eat throughout the day. Eating outlets are aplenty and available round the clock everywhere, especially in big cities and towns. Most students agreed that food could be the unifying factor. The questionnaire findings (E5C) supported this statement in that 81% of the students agreed that eating local foods would provide a better platform for the construction of a shared Malaysian identity. LH from WM5 commented:

I think being Malaysian, we eat our local foods. Malaysians are more open nowadays compared to a few decades ago. I think...during the times of my grandparents... emmm...'roti canai' or 'chee cheong fun' was almost unheard of ... never mind eating them. (WM5L 12 M, M)

BM from WM5R agreed that foods had made different people come together; and eat in the same place regardless of religious and cultural backgrounds. This statement was supported by YTL from PU1, and DH and LH from SJI in

saying that different foods from different cultures had long been enjoyed by Malaysians, such as *Nasi Lemak*, *Roti Canai* and Chinese noodles.

SV from PU1 said that it would be wonderful if we Malaysians could come up with one dish that represented all the races. When asked what that could be, he responded: '*nasi lemak*' with Malay, Indian and Chinese food gravy... how about that?' (PU1 48 M, I).

The discussion about food by the SJI group resulted in similar responses by the group members. Most of them mentioned types of food that could represent Malaysia in the eyes of the world.

The NMC group was asked to discuss how they would identify themselves as Malaysian if they were living far away from home. Some interesting responses were gathered from them. INM said '*It's easy... I eat loads of Malaysian foods...that make me more Malaysian I guess...*' (NMC47 M, M)

However, AIZ from the NMC group had a different idea; he was convinced that the most important unifying factor was language. He said '*Speak Malay [Bahasa Melayu]. Bahasa Melayu... emm... I share BM [Bahasa Melayu] with friends from other races...*' (NMC 50 M,M). He further added that it would be good if everyone in Malaysia was able to speak Malay fluently so that there would be better communication among all the people in this country. Once again, the statement from AIZ above is in tune with the findings of the questionnaire which indicated that 72.6% strongly agreed and agreed that speaking the national language (Bahasa Melayu) regularly could increase the success of constructing shared Malaysian identity.

On the other hand, KL disagreed with AIZ and said:

... but the Chinese and Indians will ask why Malay? ..not Tamil or Chinese? The Malays should also speak Tamil and Chinese as fluently as what they have been doing [speaking the Malay language]. (NMC 53 F, M)

MH who had been listening to the conversation between KL and AIZ said '*It'll be good if Malaysian schools have [offer subjects] like... Mandarin, Tamil or other languages...make it a compulsory subject to others who do not speak the language...*' (NMC 85 M, M). When I probed further on the issue of making the subject compulsory, MH responded:

Yes...at least until UPSR ...or when they are about to go to secondary schools and then later...emmm...they could choose whether they want to pursue the extra language they had learnt in primary school...but it must be available [offered] in the secondary school. (NMC 97 M, M)

Currently, students in public secondary schools are not given an opportunity to do extra language courses, unless they request to do a public exam, for example, French (which is offered as an examined subject) but has to arrange a private tutorial outside school hours. The suggestion from MH above is an idea which can be taken up by Curriculum Development Centre in Malaysia.

On elements, besides food and language, that could unite Malaysians, IKH from WM5R said there were other things that could unify Malaysian such as its unique cultures. SRA from WM5L on similar note added:

We Malaysians wear clothes that originate from other races. For example now, many Chinese girls wear 'baju kurung' to school. They have the choice of wearing a pinafore but many are comfortable wearing 'baju kurung'. So I think that is the Malaysian spirit (WM5L 14 F, M)

This was supported by a similar comment by MAY from WM5R:

Wearing traditional dress like the 'Cheongsam' or 'Baju kurung' by people from different races will definitely prove that we are absolutely Malaysian... Now many Chinese and Indian girls wear 'baju kurung', especially to school. (WM5R 18 F, C)

These ideas and opinions are valuable and should be carried further as the voice of the younger generation and what they feel are the factors that could bring people together; and 'them' in particular. Among some other things that students indicated having in common was the celebration of festivals in Malaysia and becoming involved in activities run by different groups of people in Malaysia. The students believed that school could be just the right place to support the idea of a more unified Malaysian society and felt that their teachers could be more supportive in ensuring that tasks involving diversity worked in their classrooms.

Students' views of the texts used in their literature lessons

Quite a number of students voiced their preferences for stories related to their lives as teenagers, which had kept them interested in the subject. SH from WM5R mentioned '*Shakespeare was interesting. I like to read about the way people lived during that time, the language and the love story*' (WM5L 25 M,I). On the other hand, DJ from the same group said otherwise. He said that it was difficult to understand Shakespeare or Jane Austen as the stories were set in a different century and the settings were strange. He said:

It's definitely difficult [Shakespeare]. We have to rely on the teacher to explain it to us. It's quite boring too. If it's simplified... then it'll be more interesting. I think if it's something like Twilight... emmm... I wonder why girls go crazy watching that movie... [hilarious laugh] (SJI 79 M, I)

When the students were asked to discuss the kinds of texts they preferred to use in the classroom, many had their own preferences and their own ideas of what would most interest them and also their friends. SH from PU1 said:

I have read a book by Mitch Albom, '*Tuesdays with Morrie*'... so I would love to share this story with my friends because it's interesting...because it discusses the flaws of human... (PU1 24 M,)

SRN from PU1 had his own opinion about stories to be used in the classrooms. He said '*If I have a choice I would like to bring in the Harry Potter series*' (PU1 32 M, C).

From the discussion above, some students clearly preferred world literatures which according to them were able to capture their interests based on the themes or plot of the stories. For them, stories from around the world widened their knowledge of the world or/and new approach to fictions (such as the Harry Potter series).

IKH from WM5R had a more 'local' idea. He said '*I like Lat's cartoon and it's very interesting. It shows a lot of Malaysian scenes and how different races live together*' (WM5R 32 M, M). Lat, a famous and prolific Malaysian cartoonist, has produced volumes of cartoons depicting multicultural Malaysia. In most of his cartoons, the presence of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Punjabi characters are almost mandatory. Most of the characters in his cartoons are drawn from aspects of his own life when he was young and growing up in a village where many people from different cultural backgrounds coexisted and worked together closely. Many of his cartoons have been turned into series of cartoon programmes on television and recently (in 2009) a cartoon strip was drawn on a famous Malaysian budget airline Air Asia. (Refer to Appendix 14 for a sample of Lat's cartoons). Lat's cartoons according to MH are embedded with values that could unite the different ethnic groups with simple and direct message such as 'respect your neighbours'.

Discussions about the differences between locally written stories, or stories from around the world which could be used to cultivate students' understanding of other cultures in the Malaysian classrooms drew similar ideas from the students. They generally felt that a combination of local stories and stories from around the world should be used as long as they were based on good values that encouraged all students to work together despite their cultural and religious differences. KL from NMC had this to say:

I think there should also be a combination of Malaysian people's stories and also the western cultures so that Malaysian students will not be left out by not knowing the cultures of the world...but it is still good to know the culture around and within us first. (NMC 111 F, M)

AIZ said:

It's good to have a combination of stories as this will expose us to more stories from around the world... but more emphasis on Malaysian stories where Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures are emphasised. It's good because we tend to know more about each other's culture, because even though we live side by side with each other, we still don't know a lot of things about them (friends from different cultural background), their culture and so on. (NMC 87 M, M)

The importance of creating a dialogic interactional space in the classroom

The use of dialogic talk in small group interactions can be seen as a platform for acquiring the skills necessary for the construction of a collective identity. To reiterate, the term 'dialogic', from Wells (2000), signifies the establishment of a classroom community working together towards a shared goal in the search for an understanding which involves dialogue rather than a teacher monologue.

Teachers, however, were observed to focus on immediate classroom priorities such as finishing the syllabus before the examination, and emphasised the important aspects that would be examined rather than developing the skills required for students to interact with each other by working in pairs or groups. From the interviews and observations carried out with teachers, they believed that the responsibility for constructing shared identity amongst students was by no means an easy task. Some teachers were enthusiastic about the idea, some were less so. SN commented:

Most of us are pretty much busy with completing the syllabus and getting the students ready for exams. At the end of the day, the administration and parents want to see results. So how much room is the teacher left with to get the students to think about how they can actually understand each other or to (be) involve (d) in each others' festivities? (SN 158)

Besides the difficulties in finding extra time for other activities apart from academic encounters the teachers' attitudes towards the introduction of 'new ideas' varied. These attitudes can be divided into negative and positive attitudes towards 'new ideas' – which may not be new to some teachers, but only mean a new task for them to take on. Students' achievement in exams was prioritised. Thus, it was not surprising that providing more interactional space such as allocating time for pair and group work (see Table 1 below) for students would have seemed to inhibit teachers' objectives in completing their syllabus on time.

TABLE 1:
APPROACHES TEACHERS USED IN LESSONS DURING THE PRE-WORKSHOP OBSERVATIONS

Teacher	Whole class teaching	Individual work	Pair work	Group work
PL	√	√	√	X
RA	√	X	X	X
FN	√	X	X	√
SR	√	X	√	√
SL	√	√	X	X
SN	√	X	X	√
AN	√	X	X	X
PL1	√	X	√	X
RA2	√	X	X	X
FN2	√	X	X	X
SR2	√	√	X	X
SL2	√	X	√	X
SN2	√	X	X	√
AN2	√	√	X	√

Table 1 above would seem to indicate that teachers were more comfortable carrying out whole class teaching throughout all the lessons, more so than putting students into groups or encouraging pair work to induce more interaction between them. After each lesson, the teachers were asked their reasons for opting for a whole class teaching approach during. In my notes I wrote:

No group work for this lesson as the teacher said that this was just a 40-minute lesson and she normally would have group work during a double period lesson. Moreover, the class was in the chemistry lab, so it was difficult to organize group work with a lot of apparatus around. (PrePL)

The conclusion that I reached when observing lessons before and after the workshop confirms the urgent need to provide spaces for students to be more interactive with their peers and their teachers. Long and Porter (1985) in their study of group work, interlanguage and Second Language Acquisition, acknowledge that group work does not only increase language practice opportunities; it also improves the quality of student talk, motivates the learners and promotes a positive affective climate for both peers and teachers, the subject and the learning environment. What can be drawn from the classroom observations in the present study is that teachers could make their lessons interactive if they wished and could, without great difficulty, turn a linear classroom teaching session into an interactive one that captured students' attention. As stated by Blatchford et al. (2003:175) '*teachers are the best judge of what works best in the specific context in which they practice...*'.

I also noted that there were striking differences in students' reactions before and after the workshop intervention in that, teachers in their day-to-day lessons had somehow neglected to consider the role of student interaction in achieving their teaching objectives. In the observations after the workshop, on the whole, students enjoyed working together with their friends regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds because teachers had in general made greater effort to create a 'space' for more interactions and dialogues to occur. In this regard, Wells (2000) reminds us that 'covering' the syllabus should not be the ultimate goal in education; this argument perhaps is not convincing for teachers who feel a need for time to prepare students for examinations.

Students' participation in classroom discussion can be motivated by a combination of factors, ranging from how the discourse is structured to the content of the lesson and the comfort of surroundings, and the extent to which they provide a supportive atmosphere (Consolo, 2002). So, a number of students are willing to 'take risks' to enable classroom communication. The observations suggested that the more favourable atmosphere provided by teachers during the literature lessons was largely generated as a kind of 'imposed action' whereby the teachers accommodated the atmosphere due to 'the research', not because they believed in the importance of a favourable atmosphere. In other words, the teachers provided the 'space' for students due to the research investigation. Otherwise, the 'space' was more likely to be ignored under the more normal conditions of their day-to-day classroom teaching.

Pierce (1995) suggests that when teachers provide a positive classroom interactional space, students respond in a more meaningful way, thus increasing student motivation, which in turn leads to higher achievement. This assumption is supported by Hall and Verplaetse (2000:10), who affirm that:

It is in their interactions with each other that teachers and students work together to create the intellectual and practical activities that shape both form and the content of the target language as well as the processes and outcomes of individual development.

Thus, it can be concluded that as part of the desire to construct a shared Malaysian identity, first and foremost, teachers should be willing to create this dialogic interactional space, from time to time, in order that students can practise the dialogic intercultural skills necessary to move forward towards the construction of a collective identity.

From classroom observations and interviews conducted in this study, some students' found that they were likely to be more 'connected' in groups of friends from similar ethnicity in their classroom decision making. Teachers on the other hand, were seen exerting their cognitive understandings which seemed to best serve their teaching objectives for that particular lesson.

The findings, however, suggest that although there is a clear aim on the part of the teacher for the students to achieve the intended learning objectives in group discussions by making meaning through collaboration, it does not always work out as planned. Some teachers are more likely to perceive that group work collaboration at times inhibits knowledge construction since it takes more time for students to collaborate than to undertake individual work. Therefore, it was not surprising that some teachers in this study were skeptical and excluded group work from their lessons. An example is RA's pre- and post-classroom observations in that he executed a whole class teaching approach through the entire lessons.

What can be concluded from the similarities and differences of perceptions between teachers and students mentioned above is that their insights into teaching and learning are inextricably related and contribute to different overarching ideas about the teaching and learning process. By giving a greater degree of 'voice' to the students and more autonomy to the teachers, as well as students, in their classroom decision making, schooling would arguably provide the best terrain for the cultivation of any new, positive inter-ethnic relations in a multi-ethnic country such as Malaysia.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Power and hegemony

The policies reflected in the curriculum which are put together by curriculum designers (who are appointed by the ruling government) delineate what should be included in the curriculum and what students should learn in school. The

prescribed curriculum also reflects what sort of knowledge is considered important, and therefore is strongly emphasised and vice versa. Through power and hegemony (mentioned briefly in previous section), suitable attitudes are dictated to members of educational institutions. Within the hegemonic curriculum, ‘*measurable “excellence” and maximum efficiency has contributed to the proliferation of standardized tests*’ (Bonikowski, 2004:14). This is one of the main foci in the process of schooling in many parts of the world, including Malaysia.

From the analysis of this investigation, the hegemonic power exerted by the formal curriculum through the education department, then to school management and finally to teachers was apparent in the teachers’ responses. In the teachers’ interviews, they were aware that there were other aspects of learning such as understanding cultural values, student autonomy and agency that could be media for understanding ‘others’ better. Due to the stringent and rigid curriculum specifications, however, teachers generally had little alternative but to follow syllabus requirements strictly and adhere to stipulated timetables.

V. CONCLUSION

A great deal of teaching preparation at this time involved equipping students for the examination. An exam-oriented curriculum had been in place in the Malaysian education system since it was introduced during the colonial era by the British. Although the curriculum had been revised many times over a period of more than five decades, assessment had been an integral part not only in schools but also at tertiary level. Teachers realised that they needed to gear their students towards the exam as pressure from every corner awaits them; the Ministry of Education demands schools produce good, intelligent students; the local education department pressurises heads of schools to produce excellent results, who then order teachers to do their best to at least beat the results of neighbouring schools, not to mention being under pressure to meet the expectations of parents who want their children to do well under the guidance of the teachers.

So, how does this study fit in to the situation mentioned above, when teachers play a very limited role in decision making in the syllabus design? They are just disseminators; at least, that was what they led me to understand. That was why teachers said that they had to focus on finishing the syllabus and carrying out revision in time for the more important examination at the end of the term.

Thus, in the context of this study and the Malaysian classroom setting:

- The Third Space was promoted through the official curriculum by the use of Malaysian short stories; teachers were given the opportunity the use a text other than the ones prescribed in order to engage the students in the construction of a shared identity.

- Teachers were encouraged to integrate Malaysian short stories within the official curriculum so that the amalgamation could possibly facilitate students’ own version of shared Malaysian identity.

- The development of Third Space within a hybrid discourse context is a tool for navigating students through unfamiliar learning contexts and/or theories while building on their everyday knowledge and discourse. These unfamiliar learning contexts, also known as border crossings, (Giroux, 2006) emphasise differences amongst students, and making the strange (or new ideas) familiar.

In this sense, the Third Space provides an avenue for ‘differences’ in beliefs, customs and traditions to be able to make an appearance, unlike in the course of day-to-day classroom practices through which students tend to be geared towards a general acceptance of a phenomenon where differences are set aside.

Thus, the points discussed above indicate some possible ways in which the Third Space could become an active medium of transformation with the potential to generate genuine interests in the construction of shared identity.

A corollary from the analysis of classroom observations is that student sense of shared identity can be exploited in getting students to be more involved in classroom decision making, provided teachers are willing to relinquish a certain part of their authority to the students. The point of departure is the willingness of teachers to take ‘pedagogical risks’ and try out methods and materials outside the restrictions of the syllabus. From their feedback, however, teachers were certain that a wider selection of materials based on home grown products (Malaysian short stories) would enhance the meaning-making in teaching and learning literature and be highly advantageous for developing interactive skills which would transfer later to the world of work and all spheres of social interaction. This suggests the teachers would be prepared to take such risks.

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