

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND**

**USING A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH IN A MALAYSIAN  
POLYTECHNIC CLASSROOM: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH  
PROJECT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **USING A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH IN A MALAYSIAN POLYTECHNIC CLASSROOM: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

This participatory action research project investigated how students in a Malaysian polytechnic classroom context, who were used to examination-based learning, negotiated learning using a multiliteracies approach (The New London Group, 2000). The study explored 12 students' experiences in learning English as a Second Language (ESL) and drew on qualitative methods including classroom observations, informal conversations, a research journal, professional discussions and classroom artefacts. With two polytechnic lecturers involved as part of the research team, the study also investigated the research team's experiences in engaging in a collaborative research process in two cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection.

This study was framed within Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory that states that human learning and development is mediated by historical and cultural artefacts in the socialisation process. Guided by these principles, the study examined the ways that students' socio-cultural perspectives and practices influenced their learning using the multiliteracies approach. In addition, the researcher investigated how the research team's cultural perspectives and practices influenced the research processes and outcomes of the participatory action research. Data were analysed through a critical reflective analysis because of the emphasis on reflection in participatory action research. The study highlighted the consequences of implementing a Western-based teaching approach and research methodology in a Malaysian context.

During the first cycle of the study, the students faced challenges in negotiating learning for acquiring 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge and skills, such as using technologies, oral presentation, critical thinking, peer-collaboration and active participation in designing their own learning. After considering the students' examination-based learning experiences, the research team designed a second multiliteracies module that focussed on fusing the students' cultural learning with the components of a multiliteracies approach. During the second cycle, the students had enhanced learning experiences, where they demonstrated better negotiations with learning the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

The study contributes to the area of using multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian context, showing how the students' examination-based learning and cultural practices can be incorporated with a multiliteracies approach to enhance the students' negotiation of learning 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. It also maps out the journey of the research team members whose roles were initially influenced by their positions in the hierarchical structure that is ubiquitous in social, institutional and organizational contexts in Malaysia. As the research team became more engaged with the collaborative research process, they were empowered to challenge their roles and to become active co-researchers in analysing data and contributing to decision-making processes.

## **CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION**

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Candidate

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **ENDORSEMENT**

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Signature of Supervisor/s

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Date

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Signature of Supervisor

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Date

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **A PERSONAL FOREWORD**

I would describe this research project as a project that was close to my heart. I began the research project with the notion of introducing an alternative pedagogy to enhance Malaysian students' employability skills in alignment with several government policies. When I started my doctoral study, there was a debate among academia, policymakers, employers and community members on the issue of employability of Malaysian university graduates. I had been teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Malaysia for more than 10 years and I was determined to explore the issue of the lack of employability skills among Malaysian universities' graduates by examining the curriculum and classroom practices in my institution to determine plausible causes. I noticed that most classrooms' teaching and learning focused on completing activities set by the text books and answering questions based on examinations.

When I taught students how to communicate, students were often engaged in a series of role plays, enacting what would happen in a certain decontextualized situations. Students were often exposed to pretend circumstances and not exposed to the realities outside the classroom walls. I have nothing against role-play techniques but I realized that I was more interested in engaging the students in learning activities that connect the two worlds, classroom learning and outside the classroom realities. I realized that the classroom practices in most Malaysian learning settings were still committed to traditional learning where learning the theories and essence of the

subject matter was put at the utmost importance, and less emphasis on preparing the learners for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Some researchers addressed the issue by integrating the use of technologies in learning. However, I think that the use of technology such as computers and mobile phones in ESL classrooms is insufficient if the technological devices are used to learn through conventional ways of learning. For example, the use of Microsoft PowerPoint in place of overhead projectors does not necessarily symbolise a new way of learning. I think that the use of technology should be accompanied by learning a new set of knowledge.

The research project was also influenced by the socio-cultural framework that I employed. Human activities including learning are social practices as proposed by the socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 2005) thus it is important to consider the socio-cultural factors that influenced learning and researching. This dissertation (in Chapter 4, 5 and 6) discusses the influence of the Malaysian socio-cultural background on learning and collaborative research process.

The focus on socio-cultural factors was very much related to my own experiences of studying in Australia. Through my experience, I began to notice the differences of culture between Malaysia and Australia that influenced the way one acts and behaves in certain situations. I remembered once when the Doctoral Coordinator of the postgraduate program in the faculty highlighted that postgraduate students, especially from Malaysia, did not ask questions during a confirmation of candidature seminars. She encouraged all of us to do so. This made me question myself on the

reasons I preferred to remain silent at these seminars and avoided asking questions to the presenter. The issue of avoiding confrontation and appropriateness came to my mind (this will be discussed further in Chapter 2). I realized that certain things as simple as asking questions were laden with cultural values. And I could still remember the courage it took me to ask one question in a seminar of confirmation and I think it took up the whole energy that I had in me to ask that question.

Why did I ask the question if I was not comfortable in doing so? The answer, it too was cultural. I did not want to disappoint the **request** or **suggestion** of the Doctoral Coordinator (will be discussed further in Chapter 2). After asking the question, I kept on asking myself whether I had offended the presenter who was also from a Malay ethnic group from a different country (the concept of face value will be discussed further in Chapter 2). This instance was just one of many incidences where I realized the different ways of making sense of the world between me as a Malaysian and the Australians around me. Thus, I was intrigued to focus on socio-cultural factors in this dissertation because I introduced a Western pedagogy, the multiliteracies approach, in an Asian learning setting using a Western-based research approach which was the collaborative research process of participatory action research. At one point of time several Malaysian acquaintances have suggested that that the focus and subject matter of the research project was out-dated especially in the midst of the popularity of Web 2.0 technology and online learning. However, I feel that investigating the influence of Malaysian socio-cultural attributes on learning using the multiliteracies approach and conducting research using a participatory action research would provide valuable findings and contribute to the body of knowledge about teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) through a Western-

based pedagogy which is multiliteracies approach and conducting a Western-based participatory action research in a Malaysian context.

## **FOCUS OF THE STUDY**

### **Where the notion began**

In recent years, Malaysian educational provisions and thinking have been challenged by reports on the low employability rates of local universities' graduates. One news report ("80 000 graduan dilatih-Skim Latihan Siswazah Menganggur diwujudkan semula," 24 March 2005) stated that more than 80,000 Malaysian graduates were unemployed. Morshidi, Chan, Shukran, Seri Rahayu and Jasvir Kaur (2012) conducted a study of employability issues among Malaysian graduates, and they reported that from 2006 to 2009, on average 27% of local graduates were still looking for jobs. A Graduate Tracer Study which was conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2008) showed that in the year of 2008, 24% of local graduates were still looking for jobs. In 2009, the percentage increased to 26.7% (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2009).

The issue of the elevated rate of unemployment in Malaysia was a complex issue and could be caused by factors such as slow national economic growth, unavailability of new jobs, and a surplus of university graduate; however, the issue was also related to the employability skills of the local university graduate (National Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). According to Ahmad Rizal, Malyia Afzan, Abdul Rasid, Mohamad Zaid, and Yahya (2008), the production of graduates in many fields was high; however, the demand for workers was still there because employers claimed

that the current local university graduate possess low employability skills; as a result, vacancies were not filled due to the intricacy to find the right candidate. Literature (Hairuszila, Hazadiah, & Normah, 2009; Morshidi et al., 2012; Yahya, 2006) also shows that the issue of unemployment of Malaysian university graduate was associated with the low employability skills amongst graduates.

The issue of the low employability rate of Malaysian university graduate received serious attention from the Malaysian government, and it introduced several measures to address the issue. Morshidi et al. (2012) suggested that at a basic level the Malaysian government defined employability as the marketability of local university graduate in the workforce. 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 graduate (National Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). In 2011 it introduced a 1-Malaysia Training Scheme that offered similar short courses for unemployed university graduate. The Malaysian government also provided funding for Malaysian research institutes such as National Higher Education Research Institute of Malaysia (NAHERI) and local universities to investigate the issue of low employability rate of Malaysian universities' graduates. In 2003, NAHERI conducted a study to investigate the issues related to the unemployment of Malaysian university graduates (NAHERI, 2003). In conjunction with the findings of the study in 2003, they conducted a study to evaluate the universities' curriculum in order to prepare local university graduate for employment. In 2010, NAHERI conducted a study to examine the local universities' curriculum in relation to employability needs (Pandian, 2010).



New policies were also introduced to improve the low employability rate of the Malaysian university graduate. 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” (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2006, p. 9). Sulaiman, Fauziah, Wan Amin, and Nur Amiruddin (November 2008), asserted that the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education strongly encouraged all public universities to incorporate the soft skills elements in the curriculum of all academic courses.

Their paper outlined how the soft skills were incorporated in the curriculum of Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. Soft skills were also associated with lifelong learning skills (Hairuzila et al., 2009); therefore, in 2011, MOHE *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. Recently, Malaysia's Prime Minister, the Honorable Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Razak, emphasized the importance of generating employable graduates and announced that a *Graduate Employability Blueprint* would be published at the end of 2012 (Mohd Najib, September 2012). He also allocated 200 million Malaysia Ringgit in the 2013 national budget to establish a Graduate Employability Taskforce.

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. The National Higher Education Research Institute of Malaysia (NAHERI, 2003) conducted a comprehensive study to investigate the patterns and reasons for unemployment problems among local universities' graduates. They administered survey questions to 25% of local universities' graduates who graduated in 2001 and interviewed a focus group of 63 unemployed universities' graduates and 31 general managers and human resource managers from several organizations. One of the issues identified from interviews with employers was that they claimed that the local university graduates had issues in communicating in the English language. In addition, the study also developed psychological attributes of unemployed university graduates and one of the attributes of unemployed graduates identified was that the graduates did not possess interest to communicate using the English language. Hazita et al. (2010) interviewed Malaysian employers to determine possible causes of unemployment among local university graduates and they noted that employers claimed some of the graduates failed at the interview level because they were not able to answer interview questions that were asked in the English language. The employers asserted that some graduates requested for permission to use Bahasa Malaysia (the national language) when interviewed in the English language. Hazita et al. also asserted that the employers claimed that some graduates did not have the confidence to communicate and conduct presentations effectively.

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. Yahya (2006) stated that among the significant employability skills needed by employers were thinking skills that include critical thinking and problem-solving. A study conducted by Fitrisehara, Ramlah, and Rahim (2009) on the employability skills among students of technical and vocational training centres in Malaysia reported that the students had only average employability skills. They reported that in terms of thinking skills, the lowest score was for reasoning skills, a skill that is “truly significant to make quick decisions logically or to interpret something and make conclusions out of them” (p.156). In addition they also reported that in terms of technological knowledge the lowest mean score was for “applying technology to tasks” (p.156). They asserted that some students had issues in applying their knowledge of technology in completing tasks.

It appears that some studies associated the low employability rate of the Malaysian graduates due 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 universities’ curricula should be revamped to better address employability needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Norizan, Hazita, Mohd Salehuddin, Azizah, and Wong (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.

Pandian (2010) through research under the National Higher Education Research Institute of Malaysia evaluated the curriculum of Malaysian universities' academic programmes and argued that the curriculum should not only focus on "producing knowledgeable individuals in certain fields, but also individuals who possess soft skills such as thinking, communication, teaming, and problem solving as well as other skills which are much in demand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace" (p.61). A research report produced by NAHERI (2003) stated that there was an inconsistency between skills that the graduates acquired at the university with the skills needed for work. Through interviewing employed graduates, the study showed that graduates did not have positive views towards their learning experiences in the university. They stated that the university focussed on teaching based on examinations and this caused students to think that excellent results will result in getting a good job; however, after entering the workforce they said that some skills and knowledge that were emphasized in universities were not relevant to the working environment. They also asserted that most universities' learning environment focused on theory learning rather than practical knowledge (NAHERI, 2003).

Due to the emphasis on enhancing employability skills among Malaysian university graduate from the policy-making level, many studies (e.g. Fariza & Yurni Emilia, 2012; Fitrisehara et al., 2009; Latisha Asmaak & Surina, 2010; Mohamad Sattar & Puvanasvaran, 2009; Mohamad Zaid et al., 2008; Singh & Singh, 2008) were conducted on this subject. However, there is still a need to explore the issue further

and how to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning in Malaysian learning settings at the practical level. The government was urging educators in the higher education institutions to incorporate lifelong skills and soft skills in their teaching and learning process.

In thinking about the issues discussed, I suspected that a major consideration is what is happening in the classroom. What were students trained to do in the classroom and how does this contribute to preparing the students for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This is where the notion of this study was established, which was to look for a suitable pedagogical approach to achieve the goals of equipping Malaysian higher education learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Based on this notion, I was interested in finding an alternative pedagogical approach in generating teaching and learning processes that incorporate the elements of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. I was interested to implement the multiliteracies pedagogy, to generate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills amongst Malaysian graduates. This pedagogy seemed useful because it emphasised the transformation of education due to the emergence of global economy and the advancement of technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The concept of multiliteracies was conceptualised by a group of scholars known as The New London Group (1996, 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, 1996). 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). It is essential that the education field incorporates the use of these new communication channels in teaching and learning processes. Multiliteracies pedagogy is not only about using technological gadgets 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, 1996, 2000).

Based on the discussions, it appears 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 work well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a variety of domains such as work, academic and social settings. 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, the focus of most current research was mainly on multiliteracies learning in Western learning 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.

### **Where the notion expanded**

The current research project adopted a socio-cultural framework in conducting the research process, analysing data and formulating findings. It was based on Vygotsky's (1978) development and learning theory known as socio-cultural theory. 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. Jaramillo (1996) suggested that socio-cultural theory proposed that humans learn and develop through social experiences and the social experiences shape the way they think and interpret the world. Due to this point, socio-cultural tendencies of each society can differ from each other. Thus, in understanding the learning of students from a particular context, it is important to consider the ways students make meaning and make sense of the world around them.

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, for example in the anecdote mentioned earlier about the issue of asking questions in a confirmation seminar among a group of doctoral candidates who came from Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore and who were also from the Malay ethnic group. Without



consideration or knowledge of the Malay socio-cultural influence, the situation might be seen as the candidates' inability to understand the subject of discussion or reflect the state of their critical minds or even show the candidates' reluctance to participate in such academic practice. Being part of the group of doctoral candidates in question, I knew that the issue was caused by a more complex socio-cultural influence which will be discussed further in Chapter 2. This point was also mentioned by Rosenberg, Westling, and McLeskey (2008), where they 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.

It was my own experiences as a Malaysian student studying in an Australian university which enhanced my understanding of the significance of exploring the learners' socio-cultural background in order to explore and better understand their learning experiences. The issue of cultural influences became obvious to me through the discussion of the research project with my two supervisors. Most of our meetings were about the way I portray a certain message or the words I used in the dissertation and in most cases the issues were grounded in the area of different cultural understandings. For example in the anecdote earlier, at first I wrote in the draft "I didn't want to disappoint the **request** of the Doctoral Programme Coordinator". Then my supervisor, who was also the Doctoral Programme Coordinator, suggested

that the word *request* was not an accurate representation. She taught that *suggestion* was more appropriate. This event demonstrated the two different cultural backgrounds that we were in. With the hierarchical background that I have, I understood and interpreted the action of the Doctoral Programme Coordinator as an act of putting forward a request. This is because in my cultural setting a person with her position, which is an associate professor and a programme coordinator was more superior in the hierarchical structure than my position as a student and it was quite common for people in that position to put forward a request ( this will be discussed further in Chapter 2). As a student, it was almost mandatory for me to ask questions in the next confirmation seminar as requested by my lecturer. However, from an Australian cultural background where the teacher-student relationship is less formal, she interpreted her action as simply “giving a suggestion”. My personal experience highlighted the influence of socio-cultural influence; they became more transparent to me. Asma (2009) argued that if a person is being posed with other values, just like myself being in two different cultural settings, that situation makes a person realizes the role of his own culture and how it shapes the way he behaves and makes sense of the world.

Studying culture and the influence of culture on how people behave and make meaning are very important to understand each group of people’s way of living and making meaning. Hofstede (2001) defined culture as a collective mental programming that is shared by a group of people and it distinguished the group from other groups. He advocated that culture consists of societal norms that “have led to the development and pattern maintenance of institutions in society with particular structures and ways of functioning” (p. 11). It means that each society has its own

particular ways in guiding its members on how to think and behave. Hofstede was popular for his notion of national culture, where he explored similarities and differences among the cultural patterns of countries. Asma (1992, 2009) conducted extensive studies on the influence of Malaysian culture, specifically the Malay society, towards Malaysian management patterns. She argued that not taking into account the cultural influence of a society makes the implementation of any management styles, including the ones that were adopted from other cultures, a futile attempt. She depicted the Malaysian management patterns as a tree and culture was described as the roots that hold the whole tree. She signified the importance of culture in understanding the ways a group of people in a particular context negotiate the world around them.

It was also important to understand the socio-cultural influence towards learning. Eldridge and Cranston (2009) stated that through 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 learning and how other human activities are interpreted and negotiated.

As much as it was important for Malaysian students to have a suitable pedagogical approach in achieving the goal of producing employable university graduates, it was also important to investigate the socio-cultural factors that influenced the students' learning. In addressing the issue of producing employable graduates for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many researchers conducted studies on the area of integrating technology in teaching and learning and did not elaborate on the socio-cultural factors that could influence learning. 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. Irfan Naufal and Nurullizam 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. Ng and Raja Maznah (2008, as cited in Irfan Naufal & Nurullizam, 2011) focussed on introducing a reflective learning using ICT tools such as *weblogging* to encourage lifelong learning skills among Malaysian learners. Rohaida and Kamariah (2005) conducted a study to identify the factors that influenced the students' learning in a web-based learning environment. They explored the physical setting of the computer

laboratory, teachers' role and students' readiness. In terms of the teachers' role, they noted that the teachers acted as facilitators and experts and students preferred to turn to the teachers as the source of reference, but they did not elaborate on the socio-cultural factors that might influence this tendency.

It appears that the above-mentioned studies did not elaborate on socio-cultural factors that may influence Malaysian students' learning. This was the gap in the literature that the current research project aimed to fill. In particular, the current research project provided information on how Malaysian socio-cultural factors contributed to the students' learning. Since the multiliteracies approach was established in a Western learning environment, the research project also explored the ways Malaysian students negotiate learning using the multiliteracies approach.

Subscribing to the socio-cultural perspective, this study also explored the methodology of participatory action research through socio-cultural constructs. Participatory action research speaks of participation and equal relationship between the researcher and the researched (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008; Heron & Reason, 2006; Moore, 2004; Swantz, Ndedya, & Masaiganah, 2006). This concept was quite contrary to the cultural organization and conduct of Malaysian society. Hofstede (2001) and Asma (2009) indicated that Malaysian society is a hierarchy-based society and each individual has his/her own place in the structure. Therefore, to employ a research methodology that stresses emancipatory and participatory approaches among the researcher and the researched was quite challenging. This study explored these challenges by giving examples from the research process.

Therefore, it is significant to understand the ways a society's socio-cultural attributes influence the ways a group makes meaning, understands and makes sense of the world. From the socio-cultural perspective, all human activities including learning and researching are influenced by the groups' socio-cultural beliefs and practices. Each society makes sense of the world differently from another society and it is significant to have knowledge of these differences to provide better understanding and avoid any misconception.

In short, the focus of this study was influenced by two important notions. Firstly, this study was based on the notion of finding an alternative approach in order to address the issue of low employability rate among Malaysian universities' graduates. This study focussed on investigating the issues and possibilities of the implementation a Western-based multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning setting. Secondly, the focus of the study was influenced by the socio-cultural theory that became the framework of this study as a whole. The study focussed on investigating the socio-cultural factors that influenced Malaysian students' learning using the multiliteracies approach. Furthermore, this study also focussed on exploring a participatory action research methodology through the socio-cultural perspectives of Malaysian researchers.

## **AIMS**

The current research project was multilayered and underpinned by two main aims (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; McTaggart, 1997; Wimpenny, 2010). The first layer of the study

aimed to investigate Malaysian students' experiences in learning using the multiliteracies approach as initially conceived by The New London Group (1996, 2000). The research project implemented a multiliteracies approach that not only stressed the use of multimodal resources but also the knowledge and skills that are crucial in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The research project also explored the influence of the students' cultural background towards the implementation of the multiliteracies approach. The second layer focused on investigating Malaysian teachers' experiences when engaging in collaborative research processes. The research project investigated how the researchers' cultural practices influenced the participatory action research processes.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study sets out to answer three research questions:

1. How do Malaysian polytechnic students negotiate learning using a multiliteracies approach?
2. How did the students' socio-cultural background influence the process and outcome of implementing a multiliteracies approach in a classroom in a Malaysian higher education institution?
3. How did the lecturers' and researcher's socio-cultural background influence the research process and outcome of the participatory action research project?

## **THE MULTILAYERED PROPERTY OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

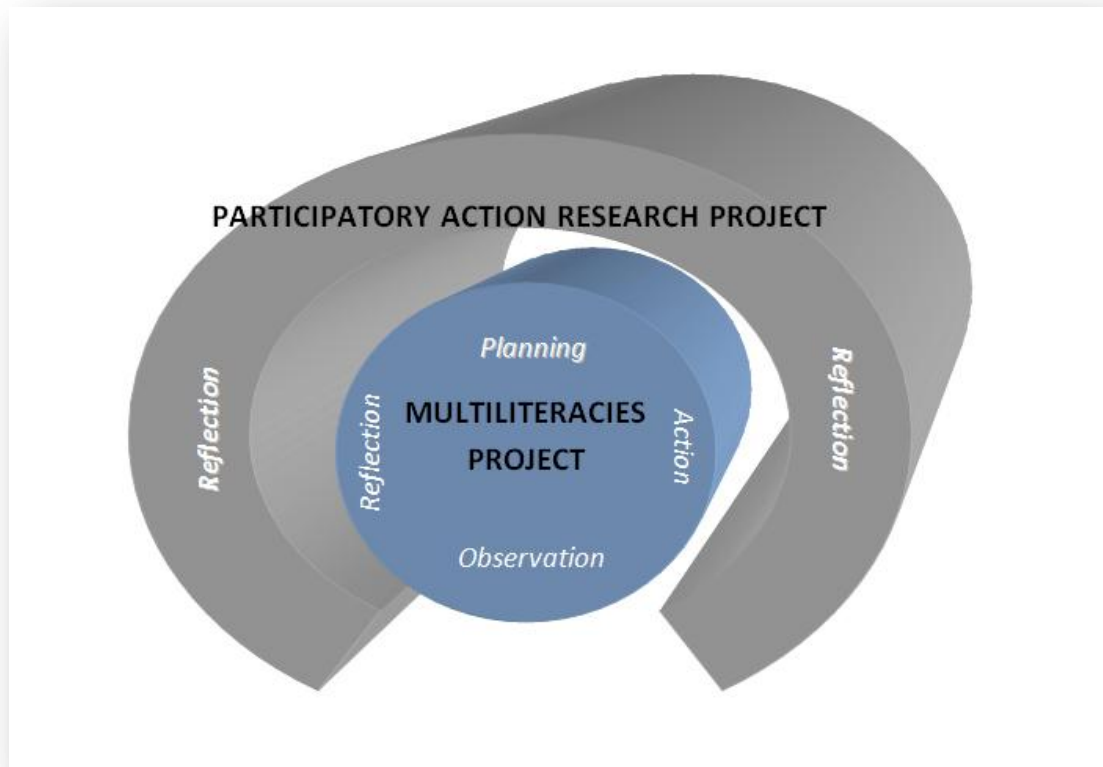
As mentioned earlier, the current research project was multilayered. The first layer was labelled as the Multiliteracies Project. At this layer, the research process was conducted collaboratively by a research team consisting of two teacher-participants and myself. At this layer, the main focus was to explore the students' experiences in learning using the multiliteracies approach. The methodology employed was a participatory action research approach, thus it involved a cyclical process of planning, action, observation and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

The second layer was labelled as the Participatory Action Research Project. This layer focused on exploring the research team's experiences engaging in a participatory action research project. This was the point when I as a doctoral candidate stepped back and reflected on the whole research process that occurred at the first layer. At this layer, I was looking at and analysing the research processes of the Multiliteracies Project from an outside perspective. The multilayer property of the current research project is summarised by Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 describes the multilayer property of the current research project. The figure shows that the Participatory Action Research Project enfolds the Multiliteracies Project. This did not mean that Participatory Action Research Project was more superior than the Multiliteracies project. Participatory Action Research Project simply embraced the Multiliteracies Project and did not over-power the research process at the first layer in any way. Participatory Action Research Project



embraced the Multiliteracies Project to enable me as a doctoral candidate to reflect on and analyse the team's research practices as a whole.



*Figure 1.1:* The multilayered property of the research project

The multilayer property of the research project as portrayed in Figure 1.1 is an important indicator of the organisation of the research project as well as the dissertation. The methodology chapter which is Chapter 3 will also be organised based on the multilayer property of the research project. The findings from the Multiliteracies Project will be discussed in Chapter 4 and 5. Chapter 6 will focus on the findings and discussions of the Participatory Action Research Project.

## **PREVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION**

**Chapter 1** introduces the research project. It provides the focus of the study, the aims and the research questions, as well as a description of the multilayered research process of the project.

**Chapter 2** discusses the literatures and theoretical foundations of the study. The chapter discusses literature on learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the multiliteracies approach and the socio-cultural paradigm of the current research project. It also provides the theoretical background of the cultural attributes of Malaysians with a focus on Malay ethnic culture. It then explains how cultural attributes influenced the learning styles of Malaysian students. Finally, it discusses the philosophy of participatory action research as the methodology of the study and reflective practice as the basis of analysis of data.

**Chapter 3** describes the methodology used for this study. This chapter includes the description of the setting of the study which includes the location and participants. This chapter also describes the research procedures including the cyclical research process of participatory action research, data collection methods and data analysis methods of both layers of the study.

**Chapter 4** discusses data collected at the first cycle of implementing the multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning setting. It highlights the reflection process conducted by the research team on the students' responses towards the multiliteracies approach.

**Chapter 5** focuses on the data collected at the second cycle of implementing multiliteracies in the Malaysian learning setting. This chapter highlights the transformations of the students' responses towards the multiliteracies approach. This chapter also presents the research team's formulation on the implementation of a multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian setting, in particular addressing the distinctive cultural attributes of Malaysian students.

**Chapter 6** discusses findings from the second layer of the research project where I investigated the research team's experiences in conducting in a participatory action research project. This chapter focuses on the elements of power and empowerment issues in the participatory action research process that was conducted in a Malaysian setting. It highlights the influence of the research teams' cultural background toward the research process and outcome. This chapter also formulates the ways of implementing a participatory action research method in a Malaysian research setting.

**Chapter 7** is the final chapter of the dissertation. It summarizes the findings of the research project and suggests future research projects in terms of extending the current research project. It also highlights the contribution of the current research projects towards the body of knowledge in terms of theories, philosophy and methodology.

## **SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter introduced the researcher's personal perspective towards the whole research project and elaborated the focus of the study. It also explained the aims and research questions. This chapter also provided an explanation of the current study's multilayered property and a preview of the chapters of the dissertation.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **PREVIEW**

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the research project by elaborating on the background of the study, research objectives, research questions, and rationale of the study. Chapter 1 also provided a description of the multilayered properties of the current research project and a preview of the dissertation.

In this chapter, I will elaborate related literatures that became the theoretical foundations of the study. This chapter is divided into three parts where Part A will discuss Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and multiliteracies and the concepts of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning that became the underlying theories that shaped the research project. Part B will elaborate Malay cultural attributes and how they influence Malaysian learners' learning styles, as these seemed to be a particularly important aspect of the research project. This section will also include the researcher's reflections on how the cultural attributes influenced the learning of Malaysian students. Finally, Part C will explain the philosophy underpinning participatory action research and reflective practice that became the underlying methodology of the current study.

## **PART A:**

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY OF LEARNING**

There are many perspectives for understanding human learning and development processes including behaviourism, cognitivism, cognitive constructivism and social constructivism perspectives. Behaviorists associate learning with developing a new behaviour through the relationship of stimulus and response (Brown, 2007; Hergenhahn & Olson, 2005; Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Pritchard, 2009; Schunk, 2012; VanPatten & Williams, 2007). Humans are constantly exposed to stimuli in their environment, and the response to each stimulus can be reinforced to achieve a desired outcome or a habit. Cognitivist scholars such as Gestalt, Piaget and Bandura, suggested that learning occurred as a result of cognitive or mental process in the human brain (Bigge & Shermis, 1999; Hergenhahn & Olson, 2005) and that it was not a solid behavioural process as suggested by behaviourist theorist. Some cognitivists viewed learning as a systematic process of processing information and this assumption informed the underlying theories of McLaughlin's (1987) information-processing model and Anderson's Adaptive Character of Thought (ACT) model (Anderson & Milson, 1989). A well-known cognitivist, Piaget, argued that children were born with sensori-motor schemata and learning was based on these schemata. Children used their schemata to understand and respond to their environment which was called the process of assimilation and later, through the process of accommodation, the children responded to their environment and transformed their existing schemata (Beilin, 1992; L. M. Cohen & Kim, 1999; Flavell, 1996; Hergenhahn & Olson, 2005; Huitt & Hummel, 2003; Jaffer, 2010; Jarvis, 2006; Piaget, 2005; Pritchard, 2009). Piaget's cognitive developmental theory

was criticized by Lev Vygotsky (1978, 2005), who argued that this theory did not acknowledge the influence of the socialization process that occurs in children's lives.

Vygotsky argued that learning involved the process of socialisation of people with their surroundings and it is beyond a sole mental or cognitive process occurring in human brains as claimed by advocates of cognitive theories. Through this perspective, Vygotsky had led a huge paradigm shift in learning by introducing a human learning and development theory known as the socio-cultural theory. Even though he started writing in the 1920s, his works were only translated into English in the 1960s (Bigge & Shermis, 1999; Schunk, 1996) and played a significant role in informing the areas of learning and development. Socio-cultural theory suggested that learning occurred through the socialisation process of learners with the world around them; however, socio-cultural theory does not totally discard the influence of cognitive structures in learning. In contrast to cognitive theories which maintain that the social surrounding does not influence cognition, socio-cultural theory suggests that social activity is where the process of human cognition is formed (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). According to socio-cultural theory, human learning and development is mediated through mental and semiotic tools in the social surroundings and language is seen as a crucial mental tool for human to learn and develop (Bigge & Shermis, 1999; Daniels, 2001; Jaramillo, 1996; Jarvis, 2006; Lantolf, 2000; Matsuoka & Evans, 2004; Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Pritchard, 2009; Schunk, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

The key to learning and development in Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory is mediation; this is not simply a natural cognitive process that matures according to a

person's biological and cognitive development as claimed by cognitivist theorists. Vygotsky (1978, 2005) argued that human learning and development are mediated through language and signs and symbols in people's environment (Daniels, 2001, 2008; Robbins, 2007). The tools for mediation are culturally and historically-determined and they include language, signs, and symbols as well as how people act. According to Turuk (2008), mediation tools are "artefacts created under specific cultural and historical conditions and as such they carry with them the characteristics of the culture in question" (p. 245).

As mentioned earlier, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory does not abandon the influence of cognitive structure in human learning and development; however, he argued that cognition is the result of the interaction of humans with their social environment. In his theory, he talks about the concept of internalisation and externalisation. Internalisation is the result of a person's interrelation with his activities and the result of these activities are internalized by the person through his cognitive structure. Meanwhile the concept of externalisation is the opposite of internalisation where mental processes could be materialized through external actions and these actions could be transformed and changed.

Vygotsky suggested that learning does not necessarily begin at an estimated developmental level. Instead, Vygotsky suggested that learning could be mediated based on the knowledge of two developmental levels (Vygotsky, 1978, 2005). The first developmental level was known as the actual developmental level. Vygotsky defined this level as "the level of development of a child's mental functions that has been established as a result of certain already completed developmental cycles" (p.



32). He argued that if a child is already solving certain problems on his own, without any assistance, it indicated his actual developmental level. The second level is when a child can solve a problem with the assistance of an expert or collaboration with peers; this level is known as potential development level. The gap between these two levels is called the Zone of Proximal Development (Daniels, 2001; Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Pritchard, 2009; Schunk, 1996, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a significant notion in socio-cultural theory and had become the underlying theoretical foundation of this research project. According to the socio-cultural theory, ZPD is the concept of space in which learners meet and learn from a person that is more advanced and knowledgeable such as an adult or teachers. This space was described to portray the distance or gap between the schema or a learner's actual development with what the person can achieve through interaction with a more knowledgeable others (Bigge & Shermis, 1999; Daniels, 2001; Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Jaramillo, 1996; Jarvis, 2006; Pritchard, 2009; Schunk, 1996, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978,2005). Vygotsky (1978, 2005) argued that previous developmental theories determined the actual development of a learner and not the potential developmental level. He maintained that determining the developmental level of a learner is just a beginning point of learning. What was important was to determine the development potential of a learner; thus he concluded that the notion of zone of proximal development would do just that. Through this notion, learning could be organized based on the learner's development potential.

The concept of ZPD introduced another notion known as 'scaffolding' (Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Pritchard, 2009; Verenikina, 2008). Vygotsky argued that children learn through observing the examples of experts or adults and interaction with their

social environment. The concept of scaffolding had become the main reference for today's classroom learning approaches, where teaching comes from an expert as well as interaction with the students' environment to facilitate learning. Pritchard (2009) defined scaffolding as "a planned way in which the teacher engages groups and individuals in dialogue and supports the development of understanding" (p. 25). Through scaffolding, the teacher as expert assists learning by engaging the learners, the novices, in interactions that bridge the learners' current learning to new learning stages. The concept of scaffolding is more than deductive teaching from the teacher but it is also about learning through peer collaboration. Through the socialisation with experts and peers, students would make sense of the world around them.

In conclusion, over the last 60 years, theories and practices of the learning have moved from a change of behaviour to a multidimensional process. Beginning with the view of learning as a response towards stimulus, the view moved to learning as a cognitive process and later to a socialisation process. Now, learning is viewed as a complex process that adopts many layers of theories. This study used socio-cultural theory to frame the research process and interpret data and findings.

## **MULTILITERACIES AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LEARNING**

This section will explain the original notion of multiliteracies as conceptualised by The New London Group (1996, 2000) and later explain how the notion was extended in theories and researches. I will also explain the characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning according to the literatures.

### **The original notion of multiliteracies**

Socio-cultural theory suggests that learning is a product of learners' socialisations with the surroundings and, based on this assumption, we could say that our social lives influence what we learn and the ways we learn. Thus, in designing effective pedagogical approaches, consideration should be made to issues that are happening in the socio-cultural world around us. And right now, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going through massive transformations in many aspects of the world including social, economic, technological, communication and working culture due to globalisation.

One of the most prominent transformations due to globalisation is the advancement of technology and how it influences the way people do things (Borsheim, Merrit, & Reed, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2006; The New London Group, 1996, 2000). Cope and Kalantzis (2006) argued that we are now in the middle of a digital revolution, where the computer and the Internet are changing the world. They described technologies as agents of democracy and intellectual freedom, and these technologies also configured the social distinctions in this world. They explained that the web is creating new social membership through social media such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *WhatsApp*, thus constructing new social interactions and groupings (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006). Borsheim et al. (2008) suggested similar point that "technologies (including computers, cell phones, PDA, the Internet and social networking sites) have impacted on the nature of texts, as well as on the ways people use and interact with texts"(p.87). The New London Group (1996, 2000) contended that the massive development of ICT had immense impact on the other fields such as language, public and private lives. For example, we have a whole new language, including terms such as *Facebooking*, *tweeting*, and *blogging*, and *phishing*; all

referring to contemporary online activities. In people's private lives, communication channels became diverse where the use of digital applications such as email, short messages system (sms), *Skype* and *WhatsApp* are more popular than the traditional pen and paper or even telephones. In addition, job applications are no longer carried out using traditional paper-based resumes but through an online application system. It seems that the information about almost everything from almost everywhere in the world is accessible through the Internet.

The world has changed in many areas since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century this has also impacted our educational approach. At the latter stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a group of ten educators became known as The New London Group (1996) addressed the impact of these transformations and introduced the notion of multiliteracies. They contended that globalisation has transformed many aspects of our lives such as economy, work and social interactions; as a result, there were new requirements for future workers and therefore present students. Consequently, many have suggested that the approaches towards learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be transformed in alignment with these transformations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Kaur & Sidhu, 2007; Pandian & Balraj, 2010; The New London Group, 1996, 2000).

The concept of multiliteracies is sometimes discussed under other terms, such as multiple literacies and new literacies. Multiple literacies (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2007; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007) are often described as having the ability to read and write multiple forms of texts such as print-based texts, digital texts and visual texts. Some researchers used the term New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Lo & Clarke, 2010) which are often

focused on the use of technological-based texts such as digital texts, webpages, computer software, online games, in promoting literacies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The New London Group (1996, 2000) described multiliteracies as having the knowledge and skills to participate actively in the globalized economics, information and social networks. The concept of multiliteracies is beyond reading and writing multiple forms of texts; it is also about having the knowledge of using and managing the current technological tools. Borsheim et al. (2008) suggested that teaching using the multiliteracies approach is beyond using technology as tools in teaching but teachers use technologies to help students to “understand how to move between and across various modes and media as well as when and why they might draw on specific technologies to achieve specific purpose” (p. 88).

Based on the descriptions above, I can formulate that the notion of multiliteracies is about having the knowledge and skills that are necessary for learners to understand, discuss, reflect and use multiple representations of texts, such as in current technological resources to participate effectively in a variety of formal situations such as economy and work, and social situations such as leisure and cultural activities.

### **Multiliteracies pedagogy**

The New London Group (1996, 2000) suggested the use of multimodal and technological resources as semiotic tools for learning mediation. They argued that these are the cultural tools surrounding the socio-cultural dimension of the lives of people today, thus they would be effective in mediating learning. Before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many educators mediated learning through the use of print-based resources

such as books, graphs, maps, newspapers and charts (Baguley et al., 2010; Charles, 2008; Iyer & Luke, 2010). But, in conjunction with the transformations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, multiliteracies pedagogy suggested the use of multimodal resources which included printed texts, graphics, videos, images and movement that are usually represented in online articles, websites, emails and social networking websites (Charles, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a; Iyer & Luke, 2010). These multimodal resources incorporate print, audio, visual, gestural, spatial representations (The New London Group, 1996, 2000).

According to multiliteracies pedagogy, the focus of learning is not limited to using multimodal and technological resources as semiotic tools in mediating learning. Cope and Kalantzis (2009b) stated that learning activities that use technological resources in the classroom, such as transferring printed words from books to Microsoft Powerpoint slides, but still focuses on traditional teaching approaches are not an actual indication of the learning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century includes having the knowledge and skills in handling, managing and transforming information and knowledge represented by the technological resources. In addition, learners should be taught to have the skills to relate those knowledge and skills in a variety of social contexts (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009b).

Multiliteracies pedagogy highlights the knowledge and skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through their concept of 'Design' where teachers, students and policy makers are seen as designers of learning (Borsheim et al. 2008; New London Group, 1996, 2000). Consequently, New London Group proposes that "activities of using language

to produce or consume texts should involve three elements which are Available Designs, Designing and The Redesigned” (New London Group, 1996, p. 12). Available Designs refers to multimodal resources, while, Designing is the “process of shaping emergent meaning” which involves “representation and recontextualization” (New London Group, 1996, p. 14). The process is not a mere replication of Available Designs but every moment of meaning making involves the transformation of several available resources of meaning. The outcome of the process of Designing is The Redesigned, a new meaning that is reproduced and transformed through the process of Designing Available Designs (New London Group, 1996, 2000). Here, through the process of Designing and Redesigning, learners practice the knowledge and skills in understanding and analysing the information obtained from multimodal resources and later transform that information and knowledge to other social settings.

To inculcate the knowledge and skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in learning, the New London Group (1996, 2000) suggests four components; overt instruction, situated practice, critical framing and transformed practice. It is through these four components that the concepts of zone of proximal development and scaffolding suggested in Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory are realized. Each of these components is bridging the distance between the learners’ actual development and their potential learning through the intervention of an expert, the teachers. Here, the teacher acts as facilitator to encourage learning among the students through the concept of scaffolding. In Situated Practice, the teacher and students explore the students’ existing knowledge and skills through the use of multimodal resources. 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).

### **Extension and research on multiliteracies**

It has been more than 16 years since the notion of multiliteracies was established, and the topic of multiliteracies is still being discussed by scholars, researchers and practitioners worldwide. The discussion ranged from the extension of the notion of multiliteracies (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Kalantzis, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2004) to the implementation of the multiliteracies in various learning contexts (Ganapathy & Kaur, 2009; Kasper, 2000; Kaur & Sidhu, 2007; Pandian & Balraj, 2010; Ryu, 2011; J. P.-L. Tan & McWilliam, 2009; L. Tan & Guo, 2010) and to other practical and cultural issues related to multiliteracies (Ajayi, 2010; Chatel, 2002; Henderson, 2004; Mills, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009; Rowsell, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008).

Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2006, 2009a, 2009b), who were original members of the New London Group, extended the component of multiliteracies pedagogy into



the practical concept of knowledge processes. They introduced Learning-by-Design pedagogy that emphasizes the point of “learners become knowledge producers and teachers become transformed professional role as designers of hybrid online and face-to-face communication” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012a, online). The concepts of Overt Instruction, Situated Practice, Critical Framing and Transformed Practice in the multiliteracies pedagogy were simplified to knowledge processes of experiencing, conceptualising, analysing and applying (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a; Kalantzis, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). They argued that this concept is more recognizable and practical and easily identified by practitioners in the field of teaching (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a). Cope and Kalantzis are also leading a global research project that invited practitioners worldwide to participate in their Learning-by-Design projects through their website [newlearningonline.com](http://newlearningonline.com).

Among other things, Cope and Kalantzis have been working on the concept of New Learning (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a, 2009b; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012b). They argued that one of the highlights of New Learning is that learning should incorporate the use of multimodal and technological resources as well as highlight the balance of agency between teachers and students. They argued that present cultural tools are actually encouraging a sense of agency or participation from users; however, traditional teaching means that teachers control the direction of the teaching and learning process.

Research on multiliteracies shows that the notion of multiliteracies has gone beyond using technological resources in teaching, but is also about engaging in the skills and knowledge associated with technological use (Borsheim et al., 2008; Grabil & Hicks,

2005; The New London Group, 1996, 2000). For example, Grabill and Hicks (2008) suggested that in writing, the students considered many factors and issues before embarking on the writing and the meaning-making process. Grabill and Hicks (2008) discussed how Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) were important in the teaching of writing. In their article they discussed that through the multiliteracies approach, the teaching of writing is not about teaching *with* computers but it provides opportunities for students to have “a social space to write through ICT tools” (p. 306). They asserted that, in writing, the students considered many factors and issues before embarking in the writing and the meaning-making process; therefore, they require a full set of technology options such as computers and the internet “to support how they write, share, socialize, play, and organize their lives” (p. 306).

Grabill and Hicks (2008) also argued that using ICTs is not enough; the teaching of writing has to come with critical understanding of how technologies enable new literacies and meaningful communication. Similarly, this point was also discussed by Erstad, Gilje, and Lange (2007) in their article about multiliteracies and digital production in Norwegian media education. They carried out an ethnographic study and observed students who were taking media and communication courses in two different upper secondary schools in Oslo. One of their findings recorded an event where a group of students was discussing the ways to download a font type from the Internet. The teacher at that time urged them to use the fonts that were already present in the software that they were using and to continue writing the content of the news media. The students stated that they had chosen the font because the font choice would tell the story better. This instance shows that learning activities that use

technologies required more than using technologies as tools to complete particular task. Using technologies in learning provides a new ways in learning and making meaning.

A multiliteracies approach also provides opportunities for the implementation of meaningful situations for learning. Pandian and Balraj (2010) implemented a multiliteracies approach in Malaysian learning contexts. They suggested that the concepts of multiliteracies provided significant situations for learning. They investigated Malaysian secondary school science students' experiences in learning using Kalantzis and Cope's (2004) Learning-by-Design framework and asserted that the Malaysian educational scene was used to drawing on traditional chalk-talk approaches in teaching. Through Pandian and Balraj's multiliteracies approach, the students were engaged in hands-on learning activities such as collecting water samples in several authentic sites in conjunction to learning about water pollutions. This study reported that the students were highly engaged in the activities, and were also able to participate in higher-order thinking activities such as evaluating and analysing. Pandian and Balraj suggested that the students were offered new environments and new technologies for learning. In addition, the students were also taught how to use technologies in sharing and presenting their ideas in the classroom.

Ganapathy and Kaur (2007) suggested a similar point when they asserted that using a multiliteracies approach provided rich, interesting and meaningful learning experiences. They conducted a mixed-methodology study, which investigated the perception of students and teachers towards the implementation of a multiliteracies

approach in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in Malaysia. They reported that the students were more interested to learn as the students claimed that the multiliteracies approach provided opportunities to learn in creative ways compared to the formal “English lessons that emphasised the use of textbooks and workbooks” (p. 6). The students were more motivated and interested to participate in the learning activities due to the use of technological resources where they were able to use technologies in retrieving information and completing classroom tasks.

A multiliteracies approach addresses the issue of diversity in learning and inclusiveness. Lopez-Gopar (2007) conducted a study on the implementation of multiliteracies in a Mexican indigenous community. They argued that the Mexican indigenous community had long been considered illiterate due to their inability to read alphabetical texts in the Spanish language. He argued that through a multiliteracies pedagogy that emphasized the cultural and historical contexts of the students, the multimodal texts that surrounded the learners became central and significant. The indigenous community was rich with multimodal representations in their culture even though it was without access to technological resources; for example the use of *huipil*, the group’s traditional garment. Even though it was just a piece of cloth, according to the concept of multimodality, the *huipil* was a multimodal text, as the designs on the garment represented multiple meanings. Lopez-Gopar described the garment as a “walking codice” (p. 168). He suggested that multiliteracies approach recommends the utilization of students’ previous knowledge including existing texts in learning. He argued that teachers should use students’ socio-cultural characteristics, as a guideline when designing a suitable pedagogical approach in teaching alphabetical literacy. He asserted that students

could explore multimodal resources available in their community first to prepare them for the skills to learning the alphabet through transformed practice component.

The implementation of a multiliteracies approach was sometimes challenging as it may contrast certain socio-cultural attributes of certain learning contexts. L. 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. Their study showed that the teacher and students became co-designers in implementing new literacies in their learning context. The students demonstrated the ability to understand and analyse multimodal texts as well as presenting their ideas using technologies. They argued that students' work using *MediaStage* (a 3D animated learning environment), to portray the themes from the study of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, displayed the students' ability in understanding the literary work as well as demonstrated the students' knowledge of intertextuality.

Although the students were showing evidences 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 multimodality 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. She asserted that:

*But I am, as an educator, I say that it is important for them to acquire these skills and that you know...I mean in their world, we don't just encounter the*

*printed words. Very much of my emphasis in curriculum is still very much guided by the final assessment that they are going to take. And so when it comes to the crux, I would still choose focusing teaching or building or constructing their knowledge of the printed words* (L. Tan & Guo, 2010, p. 323).

Pandian and Balraj (2010) also discussed a similar point when implementing a Learning-by Design framework in an examination-based context in Malaysia. In their article they reported that one of the challenges they faced in encouraging teachers to become involved in the teaching of science using the multiliteracies approach, was that teachers still valued the examination-based culture. The teachers were more interested to finish up the syllabus because they claimed that the examination-based system that was prevalent in the Malaysian education setting was impeding innovative and creative activities in the classroom. As a result, some of the teachers preferred to prepare the students for the examination rather than embarking on creative activities such as offered by the multiliteracies approach in the classroom. Based on these studies, it is obvious that the investigation of the influence of the students' socio-cultural perspectives and practices is needed to further clarify the issue of using the multiliteracies in a variety of learning contexts. L. Tan and Guo (2010) ended their article by describing the dilemma of implementing a new learning approach in an old learning context. The current study also implemented a multiliteracies approach in a learning context that emphasized traditional print-based literacy and examination success and the findings provided possible answers to this dilemma.

## **21<sup>st</sup> century skills**

This brings us to the next important question, what knowledge and skills are considered significant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

It has been established that technologies have transformed the way people do things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it is crucial for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners to have the knowledge and skills of understanding and using technologies and multimodal representation of texts (Borsheim et al., 2008; Grabill & Hicks, 2008; The New London Group, 1996, 2000). Kist (2003) emphasized this point when he asserted that learners who are fluent in understanding, discussing and reflecting multiple codes that are required by the current multimodal texts are considered successful 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. At the same time, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners need to be able to be flexible and fluid to keep up with the fast-changing nature of the technologies. Leu et al. (2004) suggested that a multiliterate learner not only needs to be able to use technologies but also need to have the ability to use technologies to identify information, and be involved in critical thinking skills such as analysing and synthesizing. They stressed that the students should have the ability to use technology to convey the analysis to other people.

The new literacies of the Internet and other ICTs include the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. These new literacies allow us to use the Internet and other ICTs to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those

questions, and then communicate the answers to others (Leu et al., 2004, p. 1572).

This point was discussed by Anstey and Bull (2006) where they described a multiliterate person as someone who

is flexible and strategic and can understand and use literacy and literate practices with a range of texts and technologies; in socially responsible ways; in a socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse world; and to fully participate in life as an active and informed citizen (p. 55).

So, the use of technologies is more comprehensive than using technologies as tools. It is also about having the critical thinking skills to analyse and reflect and synthesize information that is presented through multimodal texts.

A multiliteracies approach also highlights the ability to work in teams and in a network of people (Gee, 2000, 2002; Iyer & Luke, 2010; Kist, 2003). Gee (2000) asserted that in addition to having the skills to work collaboratively, a worker is now expected to be more proactive in relation to the interest of the workplace. This means that a worker regardless of his/her level in the organization structure is required to be able to conduct critical analysis and possess multiple skills. Ultimately, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is demanding that learners or future workers be experts in a variety of fields and do not only possess a single expertise (Gee, 2000).

Cope and Kalantzis (2009b) stated that another important aspect in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the ability of students to be co-designers of their own learning process. They argued that, in traditional classroom practice, teachers often control the direction of



teaching and learning processes; however, they argued that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students should actively participate in determining their own learning processes with the teachers. They claimed that these are the times that require active participation from all level of social strata, where we are no longer viewers but active participants in most social activities. Kist (2003) stated said the learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be active, engaged doers which means that students should be able to initiate and be engaged in activities that benefit their own learning. Kist further mentioned that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not the place for passive students. It is appropriate that a multiliteracies classroom learning approach adopts a way to shift the balance of agency between teachers and students where students would be encouraged to be co-users and co-designers of their own learning. Berthelsen and Brownlee (2005) suggested that active participation from students in becoming agents of their own learning is important. In their study of children's active participation in child care programs in Australia, they investigated how child care workers understand and recognise the rights of participation of children. One of the findings of the study showed that children and teachers worked as learning partners that signified the increasing awareness of the significance of children's active participation in learning.

In short, based on the discussions above, the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that will be highlighted in the current study are:

1. knowledge to use current technologies for diverse purposes;
2. critical thinking skills to identify, reflect, analyse and evaluate information presented by multimodal texts;
3. ability to work in teams and on peer-collaborative tasks;

#### 4. active participation in determining the processes of own learning.

In conclusion, the change and transformation of the global economy, the social world and the advancement of information and communication technologies require a shift from the traditional classroom pedagogical approach. Learners are now expected to be proactive, possess the ability to analyse, evaluate, and communicate information effectively using available technological innovations. A multiliteracies approach does not work on a limited concept of using technologies in learning but also emphasizes learning the skills and knowledge that are prevalent with the advent of technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The multiliteracies approach was introduced almost 16 years ago, but it has been extended and widely researched and is still relevant in the present times. Research shows that the multiliteracies approach provides meaningful learning experiences for students and recognizes the differences in the students' socio-cultural backgrounds.

## **PART B:**

### **MALAYSIAN CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES AND MALAYSIAN LEARNING STYLE**

It is important to understand the socio-cultural background of the research participants in the current study. This section will give insights in to Malay culture of relevance to the context of the study. It will focus on explaining what is culture, certain Malay cultural attributes and how the cultural attributes influence learning

(Aminuddin, Nur Syuhada, Tajularipin, & Roselan, 2010; Merriam & Mazanah, 2000).

### **Understanding culture**

Culture in the simplest form could be defined as accepted practices in a society based on shared beliefs and values and has been passed through generation; however, most scholars presented a more comprehensive definition of the word culture. Clyde Kluckhohn in his book of *Mirror for Man* (1949), described culture as a total life way of people, the social legacy individual acquire from their group. The main characteristic of culture was that it is shared among people in one group and it distinguishes the group from other groups. This point was supported by the definition of culture by Hofstede (2001). He defined culture as collective mind programming that differentiates members of one group or categories from other group. It was also supported by Kaasa and Vadi (2010), who defined culture as “a pattern of shared values, beliefs, and behaviours of a group of people, be it some small group or the whole society” (p. 585).

A Malaysian researcher, Asma (2009) provided quite a comprehensive definition of culture, when she defined culture as:

1. The total patterns of beliefs, customs, practices, institutions, techniques and objects that the people of the society have invented, adopted and inherited from their forefathers and other reliable sources;
2. an integrated and shared pattern of human behaviour that includes thought, speech, action and artifacts, and its survival depends on the capacity of its

members to learn and transmit knowledge to succeeding generations so that they know how they are expected to behave;

3. a way of life which gives members in a society a sense of purpose, identity, meaning and well being and generates a commitment to the primary cultural values and philosophy and the vision that members believe they can promote and uphold;
4. the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes and concepts of self, the universe (reality, harmony with nature and hierarchies of status), time, role expectations and spatial relations acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individuals and groups striving in order to adapt to the environment (p.4).

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory suggested that the socio-cultural background of a person determines how he/she makes sense or negotiates things in a particular context. Hofstede (2001) asserted that culture consist of mental software that controls a person's response to their surroundings. Thomas (2008) also suggested a similar point when he asserted that "language, systems of government, forms of marriage, and religious system are all functioning when we are born into a society" (p. 29). It can be said that all aspects of the world including learning occurs according to the person's socio-cultural background. Different societies will have different interpretations about the world around them including learning.

In investigating learning, it is important to understand the socio-cultural background and practices of the students. Neglect in this area will give an inaccurate interpretation of what was happening in the learning process and might contribute to

developing inaccurate action plans in promoting learning process. This point was discussed by Henderson (2004), when she highlighted the learning stories of three children in Australia who came from families of itinerant farm workers. The children had literacies issue but her study showed that some of the teachers attributed their literacies issues to the fact that they often moved schools and missed school so much in one year. Through her investigation, Henderson found out that the children had bilingual background, in which they spoke *Tongan* at home and English was their second language. She argued that the children's bilingual background was not considered as the contributing factor when assessing the children's literacies abilities. She argued that it was important for teachers to use a wide lens and consider students socio-cultural practices to provide all the relevant information to understand the students. Similarly, in the case of the current research project, it is important to have understandings about the context of the current study to understand the data and findings of the study.

### **Malaysian cultural attributes**

Malaysia is a multicultural society and it is not appropriate to assert that Malaysian society which consists of Malays, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups, share similar cultural attributes (Lim, 1998; Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008). *The Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics Report 2010*, published by the Malaysian Department of Statistics showed that Malaysia consists of 67.4% *Bumiputera* (sons of soil which includes the Malays and Indigenous groups), 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians and 0.7% others. Hofstede (2001) conducted a worldwide scale study of the cultural dimensions of almost 72 countries. In his research report,

he concluded that Malaysians regardless of the ethnic groups share similar cultural characteristics.

Lim (1998) contested Hofstede's claim when he conducted a study to investigate the cultural attributes of Malays and Malaysian Chinese and their implications for research and practice. He stated that the Malays and Malaysian Chinese differ from each other in fundamental areas that it would not be adequate to generalize the cultural attributes of these two ethnic groups. His study shows that even though the Malays and Malaysian Chinese shared similar cultural attributes, they differ in terms of extent, content and orientation. Hofstede (2001) had classified Malaysia as a collectivist society, and Lim (1998) argued that the Malays and the Malaysian Chinese have different orientations in practicing collectivism. The Malays maintained close knit relations with friends, relatives and neighbours to preserve harmonious relationships in a community; meanwhile the Malaysian Chinese formed associations among members of the same clan, dialect and mostly related to the business community to provide communal help and security.

J. Kennedy (2002) conducted a GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness) study to determine the leadership pattern in Malaysian society as part of a larger research program focussing on culture and leadership in 61 nations including Malaysia. Through his paper, he explained leadership values of Malaysian managers based on data collected from Malay managers. Selvarajah and Meyer (2008) argued that Kennedy's (2002) study misinterpreted the values of Malaysian managers by measuring the values of Malay managers and ignoring the values of Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians managers. It is inappropriate to

generalize Malaysian managers based on one ethnic group in the country. Selvarajah and Meyer (2008) explored leadership values of Malaysian Managers based on the three major ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians. His study showed that each ethnic group had different leadership values that were influenced by their own ethnic values.

Some studies show that even though the Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia had different foundations for their cultural attributes, they share almost similar cultural characteristics (Asma, 2009; Lim & Asma, 2001). Lim (2008) argued that “although Malaysians tend to identify themselves with different ethnic groups, they are generally believed to share similar values” (p. 40). He argued that since the ethnic groups share similar geographical, economic and social spaces, the ethnic groups’ values had influenced each other’s values. Asma (2009) argued that even though Malaysians consist of three different ethnic groups, they share some common values. According to Asma, Malaysians are collectivist, hierarchical, relationship-oriented, and religious. She added that Malaysian also believe that maintaining face is the key to preserving social harmony and personal relationships.

Lim and Asma (2001) conducted a study to explore the similarities and differences of cultural dimensions of Anglos, Australians and Malaysians, comprising Malays, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. Their study showed that the Anglos and Australians show no significant differences in terms of cultural values in management. The study also showed that the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians showed no significance difference in terms of cultural values in management. They argued that “although Malaysians belong to different ethnic origins, they have

‘streamlined’ their values under a shared wider socio-cultural environment” (p. 5). When Lim and Asma (2001) compared the cultural values between Malaysians (Malays, Chinese, and Indians) and non-Malaysians (Anglos and Australians), the findings showed significant differences. For example, Malaysians were seen to be more hierarchical as compared to the non-Malaysians.

Even though some studies classify Malaysians as sharing one national culture, it is still inadequate to describe Malaysians, who include Malays, Chinese and Indians, as having one culture. Their cultural values may have similarities in certain areas such as the concept of social hierarchy (Lim & Asma, 2001), or expressing refusal (Kuang, 2009) or using address forms (Kuang, Jawakhir, & Dhanapal, 2012), but they do not imply that each ethnic group can be collectively labelled under one national culture. For example, in Lim and Asma’s (2001) study, the findings showed that Malays, Chinese and Indians showed different degrees in certain cultural dimensions such as in relationships and hierarchical tendency. Kuang et al. (2012) asserted that Malaysia is a multicultural society that comprises three dominant ethnic group and each ethnic groups have variations in their spoken languages. Their investigation about the typology of address forms used by Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia showed that the three ethnic groups share similarities in using address forms in principle; however, their study noted there were variations of address forms used by the participants according to their ethnic groups. In conclusion, it can be said that it is important to acknowledge that each ethnic groups is distinctive and rich with their cultural values; and each group has different interpretations of the world around it.



### **Factors influencing Malay values and cultural attributes**

The Malays' cultural values are heavily influenced by the religion Islam (Jeannot & Khairul Anuar, 2012; Khairul, Jin, & Cooper, 2000; Othman, Zainal Abidin, Rahimin Affandi, Nor Hayati, & Norhidayah, 2011; Zainal Abidin, 2010). History noted that the Islamization of the Malays began in the golden age of the Sultanate of Malacca in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Khairul et al., 2000; Mohd Aris, 1983; Zainal Abidin, 2010). Zainal Abidin (2010) in his article about the Malay civilisation and identity stated that since the arrival of Islam, the Malay civilisation was transformed to accommodate to Islamic rules such as in social practices, commerce, art, knowledge and philosophy.

Many of the cultural values of the Malay society are influenced by the concept of *budi* (Asma, 2009; Dahlan, 1991; Hassan, 2001; Jeannot & Khairul Anuar, 2012; Zainal Abidin, 2010). The *budi* concept has become the underlying value that shape Malays' behaviour, manner, thoughts and knowledge. Hashim (2008) defined *budi* as an intellect that enables a person to think and understand a certain matter, to have the ability to argue and rationalize. Hashim further elaborated that *budi* is wisdom that generate a righteous man. Hassan (2001) suggested that *budi* is not only a cognitive process but it comes from the inside which he described as *lubuk hati* (depth of the heart). Dahlan (1991) explored the concept of *budi* in his paper on the influence of Malaysian local values in intercultural management. He argued that the concept of *budi* is the Malay's polite concept. *Budi* is represented by virtuous qualities such as generosity, respect, sincerity, righteousness, tolerance, *jaga hati* (caring) and shame. Zainal Abidin (2010) defined *budi* as a spiritual faculty that determines wise practice such as politeness, morality, and courtesy. Jeannot and

Khairul Anuar (2012) defined *budi* as an ethical system of the Malays that becomes the foundation for social relationship and social norms. Based on these definitions, it can be said that *budi* is both cognitive and spiritual faculties that originate from the depth of human heart that controls and determines the values, language and social conducts of the Malay society; and it also is the soul of the Malay society that underlies their thoughts, behaviour and manner that have been passed down from one generation to another.

### **The social hierarchy of the Malay society**

The Malay society is often labelled as a hierarchical society (Asma, 2009; Hamzah, 1991; Norma & Kennedy, 2000). In the Malay social hierarchy, parents and the elders possess a higher position in the structure. Hashim (2008) conducted studies on the social character traits of the Malay society that were manifested in the traditional Malay sayings, poems, proverbs and verses. According to Hashim, Normahdiah, Rozira, and Siti Sarah (2012), traditional Malay sayings, poems, proverbs and verses often reflect Malay people's behaviours, manner of speeches, values and norms, and thoughts and knowledge. In these studies, Hashim (2008) and Hashim et al. (2012) highlighted 26 social characters of the Malay society. Among them was a verse that indicated the place of parents in the society and how parents should be respected and served by their children. The verse is:

*Apa tanda Melayu jati* (What is the sign of a true Malay),

*Mentaati ibu bapa sepenuh hati* (Obey parents wholeheartedly),

*Apa tanda Melayu jati* (What is the sign of a true Malay),

*Kepada ibu bapa ia berbakti* (Serving his parents always).

This verse suggests that a true Malay is signified by his ability to be loyal and obedient to his parents. It is considered the duty of children to serve their parents in a variety of ways.

The loyalty and obedience towards parents were also recommended by Islamic teachings. Throughout the Quran, the Islamic Holy Book, it is mentioned several times on how parents should be treated and appreciated. For example, the following verse explained how parents should be treated in a Muslim society:

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, And that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, Say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, But address them in terms of honor. And out of kindness, Lower to them the wing of humility, and say: 'My Lord! bestow on them Your Mercy as they Cherished me in childhood' (Quran 17:23-24).

Islam recommends children to be kind to their parents. Since, the Malay culture is highly influenced by Islam (Hamzah, 1991; Jeannot & Khairul Anuar, 2012; Khairul et al., 2000; Othman et al., 2011; Zainal Abidin, 2010), parents in the Malay society is highly regarded and hold a high position in the hierarchical structure.

The Malay social hierarchy also acknowledges the elders as having a high position in the societal structure. Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) stated that the *budi* concept encourages members of Malay society to be courteous and respectful, especially to older people. This is because older people in the society are seen as people that are knowledgeable and possess the same status as the parents. The Malay also has a popular saying to describe the elders which is “*banyak makan garam*” (eats more

salt). This saying suggests that the elder people have eaten more salt thus they have experienced more in their life and know better about life than the younger people. Here, experience are highly regarded as much as academic knowledge. Othman et al. (2011) stated that in a Malay society the elders are the catalyst of the harmonious relationships in the society. They argued that elder people are “intellects, educator and the coordinator of social relationships so it can remain harmonious” (p. 74).

### **Personal reflections**

The social hierarchy discussed above also portrays the social hierarchy in the classroom in Malaysia. In a classroom structure, teachers have a higher position as compared to the students in the hierarchy. The position of teachers is usually determined by the age and knowledge-base of teachers. Teachers are usually older and have more knowledge as compared to the students, signifying the status differences between teachers and students. In addition, teachers are often viewed as being at the same level as parents in the family hierarchical structure (Badli Esham Ahmad & Faizah Abdul Majid, 2010; Fung, 2010), therefore teachers have a higher power status and have more power over students in teaching and learning process.

The hierarchical relationship between teachers and students defined the teacher-student relationship in the classroom generally. As compared to a less formal learning relationship between teacher and students in Western learning contexts, the relationship between teachers and students in Malaysian learning settings are usually more formal. In Western learning settings, it is common for students to address their teachers with their first name. This situation would make most Asian students feel uncomfortable (Joy & Kolb, 2009; Novera, 2004). Fariza and Isma Rosila (2012) in

their study of the educational experiences of Malaysian students studying in an Australian university noted that most Malaysian students felt uncomfortable at first when addressing their lecturers with their first names. In Malaysia, teachers are addressed by their ranks or title such as Sir, Madam, Dr., and Dato, Datin (honorary title/merit awarded by the royalty). As a consequence, in most Malaysian learning settings, the teacher and students have a clear power distance and it impacts on how they behave. Teachers and students in most instances prefer to maintain a certain distance with each other

In my experience, teachers are usually strict and really uphold their position as a person of higher status in the classroom. Due to this, teachers are viewed as authorities and learners are less inclined to question the teachers' decision or provide in-class comments. Aminuddin et al. (2010) stated that it is common in Malaysian classroom for students to "fear" the teachers because most of the time teachers employ firm and serious modes in their communication with the students.

The Malay social hierarchy also has a high regard for people in authority such as community leaders. Hashim (2008) and Hashim et al. (2012) asserted that another Malay characteristic highlighted in traditional Malay poems and verses was that the culture of being loyal to fair leaders. As mentioned earlier, these traditional Malay poems and verse reflects the cultural values of Malay society (Hashim, 2008; Hashim et al., 2012). According to Hashim et al. (2012), the following verse highlights how Malay perceive leaders in the community:

*Elok kampong ada tuannya, elok negeri ada rajanya, (A good village has its master, a good state has its kings)*

*Adat hidup orang terhormat, kepada pemimpinnya ia taat.* (A ritual of respected people is to be loyal to their leaders)

The cultural practice of honouring leaders might originate from the first government of Malay society that began at the era of the Sultanate of Malacca in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, the Malacca government was ruled by a *Sultan* (king) and administered by the *pembesar* (ministers). According to Mohd Faidz, Jamaie, Mohd Rizal, and Mohamad Rodzi (2011), the Malays believed that a Sultan was a representative from God to serve justice and take care of the well being of the people. Sultan comes with the concept of *daulat* (sovereignty) where rebellious acts against the Sultan were considered as a serious offense (Mohd Faidz et al., 2011). After the British colonial era, the Sultans were given symbolic roles in the country's administration.

Respect towards leaders is often materialized through loyalty and obedience. Mohd Faidz et al. (2011) described that the traditional Malay political culture was based on loyalty and sensitivity towards the sovereignty of leaders such as sultans. They asserted that the people were usually submissive and subservient. According to Asma (2009) in the traditional Malay community, when a person is given a high position by a company, community or the government, Malays acknowledge their status and rank and expect the person to uphold his duties and responsibilities as leaders. As leaders, they were expected to be polite, courteous, trustworthy, and have excellent manners and good leadership qualities. Asma (2009) further suggested the Malay community expect leaders to have paternalistic roles where they become the 'father' in an organization and provide help and support for the workers or other

people. As an exchange, the people will give their loyalty, obedience and commitment towards the leaders. Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) suggested that in the Malay culture, a leader is always right and it is improper to contest their opinions. Mahfooz, Zainal, and Rehana (2004) stated that “societal norm dictates that juniors do not disagree with seniors (superiors or elders)” (p. 115). Similar points were also suggested by Lim and Asma (2001), who explained that leaders are entrusted to make the right decisions and other people are expected to obey and respect the leaders and not to question or challenge what they say.

### **Personal reflections**

In Malaysia, since teachers are often seen as being at the same position as parents in the hierarchical structure, students are often required to express the highest regards and respect towards their teachers just as they would do towards their own parents (Badli Esham & Faizah, 2010; Fung, 2010). In most Malaysian classrooms, respect towards teachers is materialized through showing obedience and loyalty. It is quite common where students sit quietly and listen to the teachers attentively in the process of teaching and learning (Tengku Intan Suzila & Mohd Yusri, 2012).

This cultural classroom practice is often viewed as a passive learning environment, but in actuality it signifies the students’ respect towards the teacher. Teachers are in the position of authority and the students are usually obliged to comply with all directives from the teacher (Aminuddin et al., 2010; Fung, 2010; Holmes, 2004; Novera, 2004).

In the social hierarchy, people in leading positions in the Malay community are

expected to have good manners and refined behaviour (Asma, 2009; Romlah, 2013); therefore teachers are usually expected to be good exemplars for the students in terms of morality (Aminuddin et al., 2010) and possess knowledge to guide the students' learning. Teachers are always seen as a person of high knowledge; meanwhile the students' role is to absorb the knowledge and information like a sponge. Aminuddin et al. (2010) suggested that in Malaysia students are dependent on teachers as a sources of knowledge, thus teachers have more responsibility in providing all the materials needed and determining the direction of the teaching and learning process.

Influenced by the view that teachers are source of knowledge, most teachers used a *spoon-feeding* approach in teaching. The *spoon-feeding* culture is prescriptive learning where the teacher will pass on all the information relating to their subject matter to the students. Meanwhile, the students' role is to receive input or prescription from the teachers. Hwang and Mohamed Amin (2007) in their study of approaches used by Malaysian teachers in an ESL classroom argued that one of the participants of their study mentioned that the students preferred teachers' control in a classroom, therefore teaching and learning process was more teacher-centred.

It is also important to acknowledge status differences among individuals through the use of proper titles as a symbol of respect (Lim & Asma, 2001). Norma and Kennedy (2000) suggested that the status differences between individuals in the Malay society are clearly recognized and acknowledged through the use of the correct titles, protocols and rank. Originating from the Sultanate of Malacca era, the rituals among royalties are still preserved, for example in addressing the royalties, the Malays use



salutations such as *Yang Mulia* (The Honorable). Community leaders who were awarded merits by the Sultan are addressed with their titles such as *Datuk* and *Tan Sri* preceding their first name. In academia, it is customary to address academics using their titles preceding their first name such as Dr or Professor. Even in a family institution, the title of each family member also symbolizes their position. For example the title *Long* (the first) is given for the first born of the family, *Ngah* is for the middle and *Su* (the last) is given to the last one born in the family. These titles are commonly used in most families in Malaysia and each title show the position of the person in the family.

Kuang et al. (2012) asserted that using appropriate address forms and titles is important in the Malaysian society. They conducted a study that investigated how Malaysians which include Malays, Chinese and Indians, address people who are holding positions in government agencies. The article discussed how the forms of address show status differences, cultural values such as respect and regards, as well as maintaining face value in order to maintain harmonious relationships. Through their study Kuang et al. (2012) identified that in addressing officers that have authority, people used formal salutations, such as *Encik* (Sir) to address male officers and *Puan* (Madam) or *Cik* (Miss) to address female officers. In addition, Malaysians used informal address form in addressing lower level officers such as the office boy or tea ladies and cleaners. The used *bang* (brother), *akak* (sister), *pakcik* (uncle) and *makcik* (aunty) to display a sense of respect to the staff. Kuang et al. described these address forms as kinship terms that show modesty and respect.

**Personal reflection**

Teachers in the Malaysian classroom are often referred to Sir, Madam, Dr, Professor, *Datuk* or *Datin* (honorary titles and merits) to show respect and to mark the boundaries of relationship between teachers and students. In most cases teachers would prefer for students to follow their directives especially in teaching and learning processes. Teachers and students do have a good relationship, but these come with certain boundaries. For example, students have to address teachers with their titles at all times and attempts to call teachers with their first name without the title are considered rude. Students have to adhere to the Malay politeness system in communications with teachers so as to avoid being offensive and disrespectful (Marlyna, 2006).

I have outlined the basic social structure of the Malay community. The social structure can be summarised as below

- Older people in the community are considered knowledgeable due to their experiences in life
- People with leading positions also hold a high status in the community due to their leadership qualities.
- Both elders and leaders are respected and hold a higher status in the Malay community.
- Respect is materialized through loyalty, obedience and using the correct language in communicating and addressing people with a higher status.

## Conflicts and face concept

Maintaining harmonious relationships among community members is a very important value in the Malay community and in most instances the Malays prefer to prioritise the community's interest above their own interest (Asma, 2009; Krish, Marlyna, & Siti Hanim, 2012; Marlyna, 2006). The ways that Malays deal with conflicts are determined by the complex concept of face value, *jaga maruah* (preserve pride), *jaga hati* (caring) and the wish to preserve harmonious relationships among community members. Asma suggested that having a contradictory opinion is considered unproductive and would demolish communal harmony. To show the importance of face value and maintaining harmonious relationships in the community, the Malay community have a lot of concepts related to face value. For example, according to Hamzah (1991) and Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012), Malays are brought up to preserve their own face and others, which refers to the concept of *jaga maruah* (preserve the pride) of people. Asma (2009) defined *jaga maruah* as hiding or concealing what a person felt so that other people would not feel uncomfortable or offended. The Malays also have the concept of *jaga hati* (caring) (Dahlan, 1991) as part of the virtuous qualities of the *budi* concept. According to Badly Esham and Faizah (2010), in Malaysia, the concept of *jaga hati* means "not to induce the bad feeling onto others" (p.255).

The Malays often avoid confrontations (Hashim et al. 2011; Jeannot & Khairul Anuar, 2012). According to Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012), to avoid confrontation the Malays prefer to adopt indirect approach in communicating negative messages. Direct and forthright communications especially in communicating negative messages are considered rude and inconsiderate (Norma &

Kennedy, 2000). Hamzah (1991) argued that “the Western outspokenness is an “anathema” (p. 10) in the Malay community. Dahlan (1991) advocated that according to the Malay polite system, things are not said directly. He explained that this might be the reason why Malays have *pembayang maksud* , a foreshadow, in Malay *pantun* (verses) before expressing the real message. For example we have the following *pantun* (verse):

*Buah cempedak di luar pagar* ( A jackfruit is outside the fence),

*Ambil galah tolong jolokkan* ( Take a bamboo pole to pluck it off),

*Kami budak baru belajar* ( We are kids in the process of learning),

*Salah dan silap harap tunjukkan* ( Please pinpoint any mistakes we make).

The foreshadow of the *pantun* is the first two lines which talks about getting help plucking a jackfruit from a tree. The main message is in the final two lines where the person is asking guidance from another knowledgeable person to identify his mistakes in the process of learning. In this *pantun* the person is also using the word *budak* (kid) to signify his naivety and in the process of learning. The Malay society believes in speaking courteously and to be subtle in communication, the *pantun* really signifies the subtleness of communicating.

Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) argued that Malays prefer not to be direct in their communication because of the consequences of saying the wrong thing. They claimed that the following two Malay sayings explain this point, the first one is *betapa tajam pisau parang, tajam lagi mulut manusia* (the knife is sharp, but not as sharp as the human words) and *terlajak perahu boleh diundur, terlajak kata , badan binasa* ( If you missed the port, you can reverse the sampan, but if you say the wrong

things, you cannot retract and will receive the consequences). Both sayings stress the negative consequences of articulating the wrong thing, thus, according to Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) the Malays are very cautious with words especially talking to people from a higher position in the hierarchical structure. It is important not to offend other people or to disturb the communal harmonious relationships. Khairul et al. (2000) also discussed similar points where he stated that the Malays are concerned with the coherence of words and actions with social and religious norms. They argued that for this reason, Malays prefer to think before speaking so as not to hurt people. Malays are also quite reserved in expressing opposing views. In addition, in the polite system of the Malays, Romlah (2012) argued that speaking in a direct way is considered rude, and indirect way of communication is viewed as a polite and refined action.

Malaysians also prefer to use indirect methods of communication in expressing refusal. Kuang (2009) investigated Malaysians strategies in expressing refusals. He maintained that, generally, it is difficult for Malaysians to express refusal to requests that come from family members, colleagues, friends, employers and people with authority. He linked this point to the Malaysian cultural practices such as avoiding confrontations and maintaining communal harmonious relationships. His study shows that Malaysians prefer to employ indirect strategies in expressing refusal to maintain the face value of the hearer, to avoid unforeseen misunderstanding and miscommunications. Among the indirect strategies used by Malaysian highlighted by Kuang (2009) are sarcasm, hedging with reasons, using fillers, avoiding the answer, turning negative into positive, showing ignorance and questions with questions.

**Personal reflections**

Malaysian learners are often cautious in expressing disagreement or confrontations due to the concept of face value or *jaga hati*. According to Badly Esham and Faizah (2010), in Malaysia, the concept “*jaga hati*” (not to induce the bad feeling onto others) (p. 255) determines the cultural dimension in the classroom. Teachers are highly respected and students definitely would like to maintain their teachers’ face value by not conflicting on what the teachers has mentioned or discussed in their teaching and learning process. Asma (2009) explains that Malaysians are often reluctant to make others feel embarrassed or humiliated in public. This is why, I think that Malaysian students prefer to listen and obey their teachers rather than conflicting or questioning their teacher’s words. These instances show that maintaining dignity or face value is really a relevant concept in Malaysia’s socio-cultural learning context.

It seems that Malaysian learners are quiet in the learning process as well as not trained directly in terms of being critical in the teaching and learning process, but it is unfair to say in certainty that they are restricted in terms of the ability to think critically. Malaysian learners can still be engaged in high level thinking lessons; however they would be more cautious in terms of giving out open comments in the classroom during the process of teaching itself, as this act is sometimes considered as a mark of being disrespectful towards the teachers. This point is highlighted by Fung (2010) where she mentioned that Malaysian learners are reflective learners; however they prefer to ask questions after the class in order not to offend the teacher, a person of authority and source of knowledge in the classroom. It appears that Malaysian

students prefer to remain non confrontational during the learning process; in most learning circumstances they remain quiet but reflective. It seems that learners do not take what their teachers say in the classroom blindly or without reflecting on the information, nevertheless due to cultural practices such as confrontation is a sign of disrespect; students mostly prefer to discuss the issue with teachers after the class (Fariza & Isma Rosila, 2012; Fung, 2010).

In short, the Malay culture is highly influenced by Islamic teachings and the concept of *budi*. Due to these influences, the Malays emphasize courteous and virtuous behaviour and language of the people. In the social hierarchy of the Malay community, parents, elders and people of authority are placed at the top of the social rank. The power and superiority of these people are acknowledged and respected. Respect is translated into using the correct title and rank in the communication process. The Malays also treasure harmonious relationships between community members and prefer avoiding confrontations. All these characteristics also influence the structure of Malaysian classrooms as well as the ways that classrooms function. Teachers are highly respected and students materialize respect through displays of obedience. Teacher-students relationships are more formal and distanced. Furthermore, students prefer to be quite during the process of learning and avoid from expressing opposing views to the teacher.

### **Personal reflections on Malaysian examination-based learning culture**

A significant characteristic in Malaysian learning is that the ability of a student is usually measured through their performance in the examination. As a result of this view, pedagogical implementations in most Malaysian learning setting are usually based on examination success (Fung, 2010; Hwang & Mohamed Amin, 2007; Nadzrah, 2005; Tang & Abdul Ghani Kanesan Abdullah, 2007).

Due to the emphasis of examination success, most teachers prefer to plan classroom lessons with the objective of preparing the students for examinations, and put strong emphasis on completing the syllabus. Nadzrah (2005) through her study of using computers in English language teaching in Malaysian classrooms noted that teachers prioritised the examination success in determining the direction of their teaching and learning practices and that emphasis became a challenge to use computers in the classroom. She argued that in her interviews, the teachers stressed the importance of completing the syllabus. They stated that they preferred to follow the syllabus closely before the beginning of examination period. Nadzrah argued that the pressure of covering the curriculum and emphasis on examinations inhibited teachers from being adventurous and use computers in the classroom learning.

A similar point was also highlighted by Pandian and Balraj (2010) in their project of introducing Learning-by-Design approach in science lessons in several Malaysian schools. They argued that one of the challenges of introducing multiliteracies approach in Malaysian learning contexts was that some teachers preferred to complete the syllabus and prepare students for examinations. Some of the teachers viewed that the emphasis was impeding them to employ creative teaching approaches. Hwang and Muhamad Amin (2007) in their study of approaches by



Malaysian teachers in teaching a literature component in their English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom also indicated that some participants had deep consideration of the syllabus and examination in determining the questions and even approaches used in the classroom. As a result of these emphases, teachers prefer to prepare the students with information and knowledge relevant to passing the examination.

Nadzrah (2005) also pointed out that this pattern of classroom practice is mostly due to the academic goal of the school itself, which is achieving excellence in the examination. Teachers are sometimes worried that the students could not perform well (Nadzrah, 2005) and that would be the indicator of their own ability in teaching. In most cases, teaching always mimics the tasks in the examination convention, for example students are trained to write essays in a specific time frame and answer comprehension questions (Hwang & Muhammad Amin, 2007).

## **PART C:**

### **ACTION RESEARCH**

This study used a qualitative approach as it could provide an in-depth perspective regarding ones' life experiences that cannot be measured through quantitative approaches (Curry, Nembhard & Bradley, 2009). Specifically, this study will employ participatory action research which is founded in the development of the action

research movement, which began with the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1930s (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McTaggart, 1997). Even though most academics noted that the action research movement is rooted in Lewin's work, many other scholars could be acknowledged for the development of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Action research has emerged over time and practiced by different practitioners and researchers, and it is quite impossible to pin point a single person or organisation for the ownership of action research (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2006).

After decades of evolution, the ideas of action research have evolved from a straightforward definition of "proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, acting, observing, and evaluating the result of the action" (McTaggart, 1997, p. 27) to a more complex definition. According to Reason and Bradbury (2006, 2008), in recent years, action research has been used more widely and now it is more often described as a participatory and democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the process of thriving human purposes and their communities. Reason and Bradbury (2006) argued that action research field is diverse in terms of its theoretical concepts and real life practice. For this reason, they had established a diagram that explains the shared characteristics of the current action research movements. They suggested that among the emergent developmental form of action research were practical issues, participation and democracy, knowledge-in-action and human flourishing.

Action research is always associated with practical issues (Wimpenny, 2010). This is because the main aim of any action research is to provide practical outcomes that are

beneficial for the community being researched. It is grounded in everyday issues and people's experiences in that community. Action research is also participatory in nature. It is not about a solitary journey of a single expert or researcher; it is also about the people in the community where the research takes place (Armstrong & Moore, 2004). In the research process, researchers often interact and become involve with the stake holders in the community, in which local knowledge and expert knowledge are combined to better understand the situation (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). This collaborative relationship also brings the use of theories and practical knowledge to contribute to the flourishing of the community itself (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). In most instances, action researchers work collaboratively to provide practical solutions to improve issues and problems in their own community. In addition, action research is not only about creating "new practical knowledge but also about new abilities to create knowledge" (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p.2).

## **PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

The origins of the movement of participatory action research began in 1970s, where it could be discussed at theoretical point and political or practical contexts (Swantz, 2008; Wimpenny, 2010). From the theoretical point, Fals Borda (2006) described that the movement of participatory action research began when most social researchers including himself were searching and experimenting with new ways of researching the social fields apart from the conventional research methods that dominated the research faculty in those days (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). After a few significant research projects, a new conceptual element was identified to be the core for many research works, which was action and participation. Most

scholars, at this point, discovered that “scholarly arrogance” (Fals Borda, 2006, p. 31) was no longer relevant in learning people’s life experiences. Instead, in social research, it was pertinent to have emphatic attitudes towards ordinary people in the community (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Swantz, 2008).

Through political and practical contexts, the movement of participatory action research was associated with the critique of the mainstream social sciences and some revolutionary movements (Fals Borda, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Swantz, 2008). Participatory action research was associated with the liberation theology and neo-Marxist influences and some human rights activism (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). At the first World Symposium of Action Research at Cartagena, Columbia, participatory action research research was first discussed professionally by scholars and became a major reference for participatory action research movement. But, the symposium was not the starting point of the flourishing of participatory action research movement globally (Fals Borda, 2006; Swantz, 2008). Participatory action research was also developed by many other scholars around the world including in United States, India and Tanzania (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009).

Even though participatory action research was inspired from the intention of liberating people from injustice in social and political situations, participatory action research has now grown rapidly in many branches of social sciences such as healthcare, education, business, and social care. Due to its rapid development participatory action research now exists in many forms. In most of these practices, the main characteristics of participatory action research are the critical cycles of action and reflection as well as the participation aspect. To better explain the nature

of participatory action research, Kemmis McTaggart (2005, pp. 566-568) added seven key characteristics of participatory action research. They are:

1. Participatory action research is a social practice. It explores the relationship between individuals and the social surrounding around them. This is because participatory action research investigates issues that are relevant to the people in their own social setting.
2. Participatory action research is participatory. Experts' knowledge, which was very important in traditional research, is not pre dominant in participatory action research. In contrast, participatory action research engages people in the community being studied to be involved in the research project as co-researchers. As co-researchers, all members in the research group share similar objectives and work towards a common consensus. In participatory action research, privileged experts and local experts (Wimpenny, 2010) work collaboratively in examining their own set of knowledge in their own community setting.
3. Participatory action research is practical and collaborative. It is practical because it involves people to examine issues pertinent to their own social practice in their own social setting. The first step towards conducting a participatory action research study is the analysis of the issues that the researchers are facing in their community. In this process, participatory action research links people from every level in the social structure to collaboratively solve issues and problems in their community.

4. Participatory action research is emancipatory. Participatory action research is not limited to describing and understanding ontological knowledge like most researches. It is more democratizing and aims to liberate people from social injustice and oppression. Specifically, it aims to help people to “recover, release themselves from the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self- development and self-determination” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 567).
  
5. Participatory action research is critical. It provides a platform for people to consciously improve and liberate themselves from unfair and unproductive social and political practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) through a critical research design (Hawkins, 2010). This research design that consists of the overlapping of planning, action, observation, and reflection process and participation from all stakeholders in the community allows researchers to continually examine their practices and encourage non-discriminatory practice.
  
6. Participatory action research is reflexive (e.g., recursive, dialectical). It provides a platform for researchers to change and transform their own practices through a dialectical process where researchers have to go through a series of planning, action, observation and reflection process. To maintain the trustworthiness of the data, this process of planning, action, observation and reflection should be done in several cycles. In addition, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) stated that participatory action research is not just about

changing people' social practice but also about changing people's world in order to learn more about their own practice.

7. Participatory action research aims to transform both theory and practice. Participatory action research does not consider the dominance of theory over practice or practice over theory. Instead, participatory action research aims to highlight the interdependence of both theory and practice. In the course of examining the issues pertinent to the community, researchers refer to available theories and at the same time use available theories to understand and confront the issues in local contexts. As the end product, participatory action research transform the theories and practices of both researchers and other people whose theories and perspectives help to shape the understanding of a specific setting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

### **Issue of power distance in participatory action research**

Scholars in participatory action research (Brydon-Miller, 2009; Fals Borda, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; McTaggart, 1997; Swantz, 2008; Wimpenny, 2010) suggest that participatory action research engages all members of the community in democratic ways by working collaboratively in studying their own social practice. Participatory action research stresses the egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the researched, where participants are invited to be the co-researchers together with the researcher as facilitator (Grant et al., 2008; Heron & Reason, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Moore, 2004; Swantz, 2008). When talking about democratizing research participants, the issue of

power distance comes to mind, where the ideal of participatory action research encourages equal status among all research participants.

Power distance was used by Hofstede (2001) as one of the cultural dimensions in describing national culture. According to the Hofstede Centre (2013), power distance is:

This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalise the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power (online).

Power distance highlights the differences of status of individuals within a societal structure and determines the social hierarchy. Basset (2004) described power distance as a way in which power is distributed within individuals in certain cultures. He asserted that certain cultures recognize a higher degree of unequal power status as compared to other cultures. A similar point was also mentioned by Mooij and Hofstede (2011) who described power distance as “as the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (p. 182). They asserted that in certain societies, one’s social status must be clear so that others can demonstrate a sense of respect.



Even though the ideals of participatory action research advocate egalitarian relationships among research participants, some studies on participatory action research discuss the question of power distance in participatory action research. Baum, MacDougal, and Smith (2006) argued that in participatory action research the researched become researchers and cease to be the objects of research and become partners in the study. Chowns (2008) explored the elements of status differences in her participatory action research project of investigating issues faced by children facing the life threatening illness of parents. The project was conducted with nine children who were facing the serious illness and possible death of parents. Chowns asserted that adults hold considerable amount of power over children. She described children as less powerful people because children are often associated with vulnerability thus given less status as compared to adults. At the initial stage of her study, Chowns noted that, even though taking the role of co-researchers, the children were mostly conforming. For instance, the children carried out actions which they thought matched with what the researcher wanted. In some cases, the students ask for permission such as “Can we ask the others some questions?”(p. 569).

One of the main issues of power differences in participatory action research project was the issue of total collaborative effort among the research participants. Ospina, Dodge, Foldy, and Hofman-Pinilla (2008) reported their participatory action research experience in their effort in introducing participation as a key feature of a large-scale, multi year, United States-based research. In their paper, they discussed the ways collaborative research process addressed the issues of control, action and voice. Ospina et al. argued that a small amount of control was present in the beginning of the research project, where as initiators of the research project, they set “general

parameters of the research activities before the participants arrived” (p. 425). They asserted that due to the requirements of the foundation that commissioned the research project, they had to take control on certain aspects thus reminding them constantly about the question of true collaboration as suggested by participatory action research paradigm. Frisby, Reid, Millar, and Hoeber (2005) also discussed the element of power distance in their participatory action research. They conducted participatory action research with a community-based organization called Women Organizing Activities for Women (WOAW) which involved participation of women of low income, community partners and a research team. As researchers and initiators of the research project, they were the gate keepers of the budget from the funder and sometimes their role as gatekeeper caused tension among other participants especially in terms of using the allocation for something that is not classified as research expenses by the funder of the research project. They asserted that their role as gate keepers was a constant reminder about the privilege of people with power.

Is there any evidence of equal status in participatory action research? Chowns (2008) argued that in her research project, the status differences between the facilitator and co-researchers was an oscillation, where power shifted from facilitators to co-researchers. Sometimes the children shifted the balance of power to the adults and she mentioned that in certain times, the facilitators had to exercise their “legitimate power as adults” (p. 570) to control the structure of their discussion session so that the children were freed to focus on content. Equal status among all research participants was also questionable in Atweh’s (2003) participatory action research project, where he asserted that at certain times the university lecturers assisted the

students to write the research report to ensure the credibility of these reports. The university researchers viewed the practice as an apprenticeship for the students to develop research skills instead of partners in research. However, one student felt that they were used as experiment objects to test the validity of the action research process.

This brings us back to the original question, whether participatory action research could truly be collaborative and democratising? Frisby et al. (2005) argued that despite the ideals of participatory action research that recommends all research process to be undertaken with all co-researchers, they as facilitators conducted certain aspects of the research process such as writing the interview questions, conducting interview and writing final reports and manuscripts. They argued that this was necessary because they had the specialized knowledge and the accountability to conduct the mentioned research process. Furthermore, Frisby et al. raised the issue that in certain times research participants expected them to take more active leadership role as they were the initiator, conducted the initial workshop and obtained the research grant. They argued that they were able to encourage participation and collaborative effort; however, it was impossible to level status differences between middle class researchers, community partners and women of low income. Frisby et al noted that:

We spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the power dynamics and determined that power needs to be constantly negotiated and managed despite good intentions, deliberate group processes, and ongoing reflection. For instance, each phase of the project was rife with power issues—determining the focus and research questions, developing democratic and trusting

relationships, collecting and analyzing the data, and communicating the results for action (p. 381)

### **Issues of empowerment and social transformations in participatory action research**

Empowerment is also a significant topic of discussion in research on participatory action research; it is difficult to pinpoint the exact definition of empowerment (Hipilito-Delgado & Courtland, 2007; Kasmel, 2011). Aral (1997) described empowerment as a change of capacity to control, or an increase of power and the ability to use it. Empowerment relates to the concept of the ability of people to understand and control over personal, economic and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations (Israel, Chekoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman, 1994). Gutierrez (1995) defined empowerment as “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve situations” (p. 229). According to Hipilito-Delgado and Courtland (2007), the main aim of empowerment theory is the liberation of marginalised people and communities. Based on the definitions, being empowered is about having the understanding and control to change the present situation. It is a process where individuals take charge and act to improve their situations. Baum et al. (2006) argued that that participatory action research challenges the concept of knowledge control established through mainstream research. So, when people are involved in a participatory action research, they seek control through researching, thus establishing themselves as powerful agents.

In negotiating the issue of power distance in participatory action research, some research also shows that participatory action research did provide opportunities for empowering the research participants. Chowns (2008) suggested that even though the balance of power oscillated among her participants, in the end, through collaborative effort, the children were empowered in terms of knowledge about what they were facing and her study shows that children are more capable and articulate than adults think. She argued that through the collaborative effort of participatory action research, the children were empowered as the research inquiry put the children as “knowers, actors, and equals” (p. 568) and as an adult, Chown “endeavoured to assert this in word and action” (p. 568). Ospina et al. (2008), upon reflecting on their participatory action research, argued that the control of the direction of the research process was eventually shared among the co-researchers; however, it involved a “lot of negotiation over who would do what, who would take ownership over what” (p. 425). They concluded that in their study the power dynamics were contested but the research participants were empowered through the negotiations of the research process.

It appears that participatory action research provides an outlet for people who were traditionally marginalised by the mainstream research to be empowered to change their own social practice. Atweh’s (2003) The Students Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project aimed to increase the participation of youth from targeted disadvantaged groups such as the Aboriginal students, Torres Strait Islanders students, women in traditional and post-graduates courses, students from certain non-English background as well as low income students in higher education. He began the research project with the notion of empowering students, who

according to him have been exposed to research activities that are not genuine and do not engage the students in the decision-making or problem solving of real life problems. In addition, he advocated that students as stakeholders in the educational planning have often been left behind and through participatory action research these students were able to conduct research on themselves rather than be a subject or object of research. The project was conducted for eight years with the participation of university lecturers, school teachers and under-represented students. Atweh (2003) particularly highlighted that the students were empowered as they engaged in the research process. He said that the students demonstrated considerable research sense and critical appreciation of the research process. The students also gained knowledge and understanding of the university system through research activities conducted in the university and some students were empowered by the knowledge that they were considering studying in a university themselves. From the findings of this study we can see that participatory action research is an effective tool to generate empowerment among marginalised parties. It is achieved through active participation in research activities that helped people to gain further knowledge about their own social practice. Furthermore, participatory action research also provides a platform for developing practical ways to solve the issues.

What is intriguing about participatory action research is that it is not only restricted to the empowerment of marginalised groups, but it is also a suitable tool to improve any situation that requires practical solution. James (2006) talked about participatory action research as a tool for teachers' professional development in her *Colorado Educators Using Participatory Action Research to Study Homeless and High Mobility Students (COPAR)*. COPAR involved eight school administrators, eight

teachers and one homeless shelter education provider. COPAR aimed to investigate the areas of educational disadvantage such as homeless children and high mobility students. James asserted that, at the initial stage, some of the participants felt frustrated due to the high-commitment needed by the research project and the complexity of action research concepts. However, as the research progressed, some of the participants demonstrated engagement with the research process through having more understanding of the issue and felt empowered to change the existing social practice. One co-researcher, a small town teacher, claimed that COPAR empowered him to investigate the issue further in practical ways that he thought he would never done before. He stated that

I never talked to the lunch lady before, until I needed to figure out why one of my homeless students wasn't eating breakfast. I never talked to the homeless liaison before, until I needed to figure out why the bus wasn't getting a student to school on time (p. 531).

It seems that participatory action research has emancipatory and transformative characteristics (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Cahill, 2007; Langhout & Thomas, 2010) because action is part of the inquiry process. Participatory action research process involves research groups in a dialectical process of planning, action, observation and reflection (Grant et al., 2008; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). James (2006) stated that participatory action research was emancipatory because three of the 2003-2004 COPAR research group members were motivated enough to participate in another round of COPAR in 2005-06. Fazio and Melville (2008) initiated a participatory action research with the objective of improving teachers' professional development through investigating the issue of implementing two

government-mandated curriculums, which were students' engagement and expertise in scientific inquiry and development of reasonable conception of the philosophical and the nature of science in the teaching and learning of science in Canada. The study was conducted with four science teachers and one researcher. Through the action research design, the research team successfully explored its own conception about the government-mandated categories in the learning of science. Fazio and Mellville stated that one of the outcomes expected from the project was modified curriculum practices that suit the two government-mandated categories. They asserted that by the end of the research project, the teachers "developed their own curricular practices suitable to their local school context" (p. 200).

Another study that reflected the emancipatory and transformative characteristic of participatory action research was reported by Swantz et al. (2006). The article reported the learning from *Participatory Research to Explore Women's Potential for Credit: a case study of Muungano Women's Group in Ruangwa Tanzania*. The study began with the notion of enabling women in the rural areas to make exploration of "potential opportunities and constraints to take the decision themselves whether or not to apply for credit for carrying out economic activities" (p. 288). According to the standard practice, the application for credit is usually made on behalf of the women where a government official will write up a project proposal and make decisions for the women. The study mapped out the research process of these women from deciding on producing bricks to generate income to analysing their needs to improve the brick-making activity. Through the research process the women decided to take a loan from a bank. The women's leader stated that the women now had the knowledge on the cost of buying tools and had plans how to repay the loan,



knowledge that they did not have before engaging in the participatory action research. It seemed that the women successfully transformed their own social practice. They were no longer waiting for things to be done for them but now managed to assess their own needs and plan for action.

In conclusion, participatory action research is a branch of action research with the emphasis on participation by members from all levels of a community, as equals to investigate practical issues in their own community by providing practical solutions. Studies on participatory action research showed that there were considerable issues on power distance among participants of research. Studies also showed that participatory action research became the catalyst for empowerment and social transformations.

## **REFLECTIVE PRACTICE**

Due to the close relationship between reflection and action in participatory action research, this section will explain the underlying theories of reflective practice.

The basic meaning of reflection or reflective practice is looking back and thinking about our practices and how to improve it. However, a reflective practice is more of looking back at practices and Hendricks (2009) stated that reflection is more than thinking. Dewey (1933, 1938) defined reflection as “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Jay & Johnson, 2002, p. 9). In his work, Dewey made a distinction between routine action

and reflective action. The former includes actions such as habits and traditional practices where they have not been considered actively and the latter includes actions that are carefully considered and justified (Paige-Smith & Craft, 2011). Dewey believed that if teachers are not involved in a reflective practice, teachers might be basing their teaching on uninformed and outdated thinking. Another prominent theorist for reflection was David Schon (1983, 1987), where he theorised reflection for professional practitioners. York-Barr, Sommers, Ghore, and Montie (2006) reported that Schon emphasized practitioner-generated, intuitive knowledge derived from experiences. In short, reflections involve practitioners in scholarly activities such as thinking and analysing their practices through diverse perspectives and different levels of reflection processes with the aim of improving and enhancing their existing professional practices.

### **Process of reflective practice**

What are considered important in conducting reflective practice? Many scholars (e.g., Butke, 2006; Etscheidt, Curran, & Sawyer, 2012; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Macfarlane, Noble, Kilderry, & Nolan, 2006; Smyth, 1992; Ward & McCotter, 2004; York-Barr et al., 2006) have designed specific models and frameworks to assist reflective practitioners in conducting effective reflections. Schon's (1983, 1987) works have been influential in the field of reflective practice when he described two types of the process of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to the present tense and is undertaken by reflective practitioner during practice to develop awareness of decisions made during practice (Etscheidt et al., 2012). Reflection-on-action refers to reflections that are made after

the practice has completed where the reflective practitioner analyses the practice as a whole and developed interpretive critique of the experience (Etscheidt et al., 2012).

Killion and Todnem (1991) expanded Schon's process of reflection to include the concept of reflection-for-action which explained reflection process that occurs as a result of reflecting in and on action; a way of guiding future actions based on past judgments and practices (Hendricks, 2009; York-Barr et al. 2006). Butke (2006) also expanded Schon's reflection types by adding reflection-fore-action that signifies the step taken after conducting reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action steps. Butke stated that "Reflection-fore-action incorporates all possibilities of reflection that transpire before a teaching episode occurs" (p. 64).

It appears that before the reflection takes place, reflective practitioners need to engage in a space to address personal, contextual and professional factors. York-Barr et al. (2006) in her Theory of Action for Reflective Practice indicated that the first step of reflective requires a *pause*. It can be intentional and it can happen unexpectedly in the process of dealing with conflicts. A pause is a space in which "presence and openness can emerge" (p. 9). At this stage, York-Barr et al. described that this space is a precursor to "conscious deliberative thought, response and action". Stanley (2012) proposed a framework for teacher reflectivity that consists of six reflective processes. Stanley noted that the first step of reflective practice is the teachers' own engagement with the practice itself by analysing their own personal, professional and contextual factors that could impact the reflection process. Once teachers are engaged with reflection, teachers could think reflectively.

Jay and Johnson (2002) in their typology of reflective practice indicated that the first step was a descriptive reflection where reflective practitioner set the problem, meaning identifying “what will become the matter of reflection” (p. 77). Smyth (1992) also described that the first step of reflective practice was to describe the existing practices with the practitioners’ own words. This, according to him provides practitioners with tangible proof as a preamble to problematizing their practices. It seems that preceding a reflective practice, reflective practitioners require a momentary space to really analyse their present situations including personal, contextual and professional factors that would provide them with initial understanding of what they were facing to further enhance the reflective process afterwards. Etscheidt et al. (2012) in his multilevel model to promote reflection in teacher preparation began with technical level stage where critique of lesson development and delivery is carried out. They focussed on addressing professional factors by suggesting practitioners produce a product orientation that represented their knowledge and skills to enhance students’ development.

It is also important in reflective practice to have the ability to confront and think about significant aspects that are embedded in practice. Macfarlane et al. (2006) in their four-step model of developing critical reflection asserted that a reflective practitioner should confront issues in their practice by asking questions related to their practice and comparing them with the practices of others. In Smyth’s (1992) reflection model, he described confronting as the stage that comes after informing. He asserted that the informing stage is a precursor to confronting where practitioners describe their teachings and create explanatory principles about the practices. At the confronting stage, Smyth argued that practitioners interrogate the legitimacy of the

theories formed at the informing stage through asking questions about theoretical assumptions that underlie the practices. This step is related to Stanley's (2012) second step in his framework for teacher reflectivity where practitioners think reflectively, beyond thinking back on a classroom situation and describing what happened and how the teachers felt about it. It is thinking about the practice and asking relevant questions in order to get better understanding of the situation, and relating the situation to a bigger picture. York-Barr et al. (2006) indicated that the questioning and confronting of the researcher's own practices should be followed with thinking. They defined thinking as "the active, deliberate, and conscious processing of thoughts for examining goals, beliefs and practices" (p.10). Etscheidt et al. (2012) suggested similar approach to reflection through his deliberative reflection stage. At this stage, practitioners are encouraged to think about their practices and consider how their personal values affect their professional practice.

Some studies also highlighted the importance of theorising aspects of practice and analysing the aspects from multiple perspectives. Macfarlane et al. (2006) advocated that confronting and thinking about one's own practice was linked to the ability to theorise. They further asserted that the link between theory and practice is essential and all reflective practice "must be underpinned by a solid understanding of theory" (p.18). At this stage practitioners analysed significant aspects of their practice and formulated or generalized the issue to other similar situations. It was also important to consider other perspectives towards the practice as Macfarlane et al. (2006) argued that in the thinking otherwise step, it is important to think about the practice in multiple perspectives because one single practice might have multiple interpretations and meanings. This notion was also supported by Jay and Johnson

(2002) when his reflective steps included comparative stage, where practitioners analysed their practices using alternative views, perspectives and research. They asserted that through this, practitioners would gain new insights on their practice. Etscheidt et al. (2012) discussed similar points where in his final step of reflection, a critical reflection stage, where practitioners examine the moral and ethical dimensions of their practices and the conflict between personal values and universal limitations.

Another step that is significant in reflective practice is taking action. York-Barr et al. (2006) argued that reflective practice will only lead to improvement if it is followed by better understandings and action. Butke (2006) emphasize the importance of action after reflection when she extended Schon's types of reflections with the reflection-fore-action. According to her, reflection-fore-action is a stage that occurred after reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action where certain understandings have been reached and would impact on the following teaching episode. Through her Cyclical Model of Reflection, she argued that reflections take place before, during or after a teaching episode. Jay and Johnson (2002) also talked about taking action in their critical reflection stage where, after considering a problem from multiple perspectives, practitioners make judgement or a choice among actions or simply integrate the results of their reflections into a new and better understanding of the problem.

In short, based on literatures, it seems that in the process of conducting a reflection focussed on the following areas:

1. Space to address personal, contextual and professional issue

2. Opportunity to confront and think about aspects of practice
3. Occasion of theorising and analysing aspects of practice from multiple perspectives
4. Opportunity to implement action based on the findings of critical reflection.

## **THEORETICAL DIAGRAM OF THE STUDY**

To ease the understanding of the readers of this dissertation, the following Figure 2.1 explains the theoretical foundations that influenced the current research project. Figure 2.1 shows that the overlapping of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), The New London Group's multiliteracies concept (1998, 2000) and participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart) shaped the nature and design of the current study. From the sociocultural perspectives of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), the current study investigated how a multiliteracies approach (The New London Group, 1998, 2000) was negotiated in a classroom in a Malaysian university. The investigation was conducted through a participatory action research methodology (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

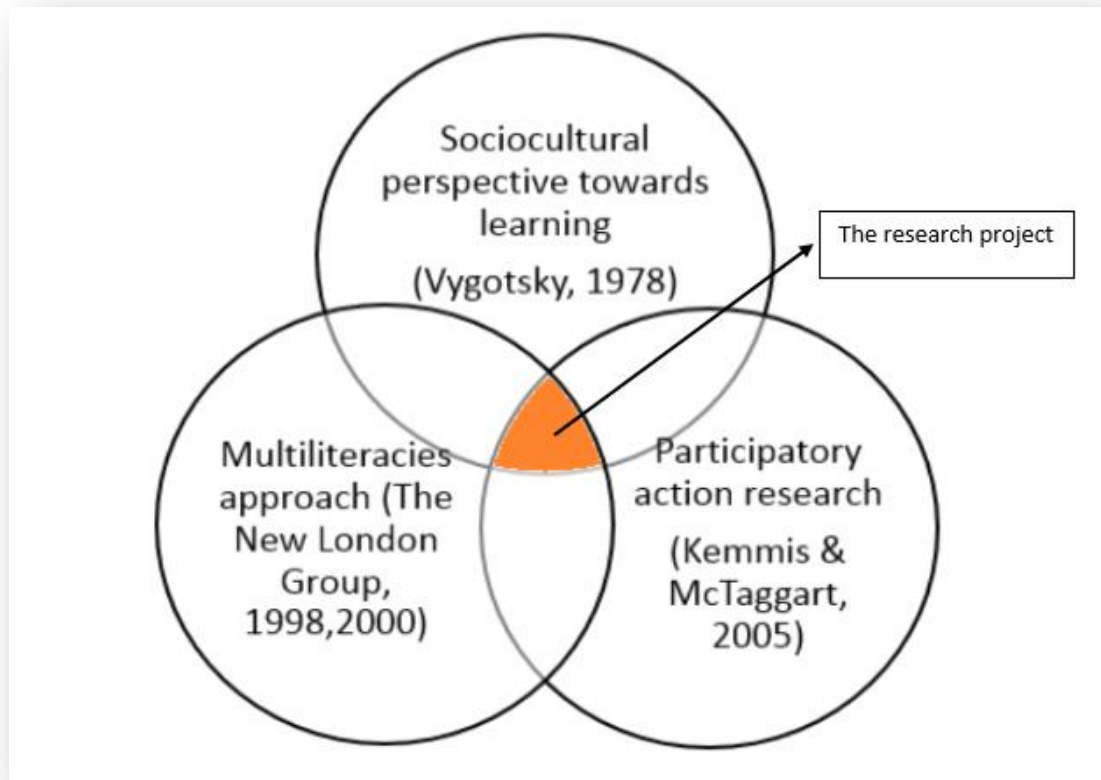


Figure 2.1: The theoretical foundations of the research project

## SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter explained the literature and theoretical foundations of the current study. Part A discussed socio-cultural theory, multiliteracies and learning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the theoretical framework that shaped the study. Part B discussed the socio-cultural background of the research participants that informed the outcomes of the study. Part C discussed the underlying theories that informed the methodology of the study which were participatory action research and reflective practice. The chapter concluded with a diagrammatic explanation of the theoretical foundations of the current research project.



Chapter 3 will outline the methodology of the current study by explaining the site of research, participants, design of the study, data collection methods, data analysis methods and ethics of the study.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In Chapter 2, I have explained the literature and theoretical concepts that framed this study. Chapter 3 will explain the methodology used to collect and analyse data at the two layers of this research project which were the Multiliteracies Project and the Participatory Action Research Project. This chapter will begin by explaining the context of the study which includes the description of the site and the participants of the current research. Following this an explanation will be given regarding design of the study, data collection and data analysis methods of both the Multiliteracies Project and the Participatory Action Research Project. Finally, this chapter outlines the ethical considerations of the study.

#### **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

##### **Site of research**

This study was conducted at Bakti Polytechnic (pseudonym). It is one of the many polytechnics in Malaysia and is situated in a state in Peninsular Malaysia. Since its establishment in 1990, Bakti Polytechnic has produced more than 20 000 graduates in engineering and commerce. Currently, it has more than 5000 students and 300 academic and support staff. Bakti Polytechnic offers diploma courses in five main streams: civil engineering, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, commerce and secretarial science.

Before 2009, Bakti Polytechnics was under the management of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, who is also responsible for managing primary and secondary education institutions in Malaysia. The main aim of polytechnics at that time was focussed on producing semi-professionals for the Malaysian workforce by offering diploma programs. Under the same management of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, polytechnics and primary and secondary schools shared similar education systems. For example, all teaching staff were addressed as teachers and the main job specification was mostly related to teaching activities and students' affairs. Teachers' involvement in research activities was optional. Since priority was given to teaching activities, most teachers did not engage in research activities.

In 2009, the management of all Malaysian polytechnics was put under the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) which was also responsible for the management of public universities in Malaysia. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education introduced a new policy which was known as Polytechnics' Transformation Plan (Sahul Hamed, Mohd Amin, & Mohd Ali, 2010). The main vision of this transformation was to upgrade polytechnics to universities by the year 2015. According to the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, polytechnics are now aiming to be leading institutions in producing professionals for the Malaysian workforce in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mohd Khuzairi, 25 February 2010). As part of the process, three polytechnics were chosen to be premier polytechnics which would get the most monetary allocations to upgrade their facilities and human resource to realize their transformation. Teachers' job requirements were also transformed. An official document (Civil Services Department of Malaysia, 2007) outlined that in conjunction of the transformation

policy of the polytechnics, all teaching positions were reclassified to lecturing positions. The lecturers were required to be more involved in research activities in conjunction with their regular teaching duties. Research and academic publication activities have become important criteria for the lecturers' professional development and annual appraisal (Civil Services Department of Malaysia, 2007).

Conducting research and publishing academic papers has also become one of the main agendas in the Bakti Polytechnic academic setting, and this factor may have influenced the Director's and the Head of the English Language Department's decision in approving my application to conduct the current research project at their institution. Bakti Polytechnic was ready to realize the transformations as required by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education's Polytechnic's Transformation Plan (Director of Bakti Polytechnic, personal communication, 5 August 2010). It was establishing a one-stop centre to coordinate and monitor research activities and entrepreneurship through a network and collaboration of researchers and outside agencies. In addition, Bakti Polytechnic was also in the process of improving its curriculum and teaching and learning practices through direct collaboration with researchers and people in the industry. My research project was seen as one of the initial steps for Bakti Polytechnic to be part of the Polytechnics' Transformation Plan (personal communication with the Director of Bakti Polytechnic).

### **Participants: Teachers as co- researchers**

The search for participants for the research project was not easy because the participants who agreed to join the research project withdrew just weeks before the research project was scheduled to start. The initial search began with a personal

telephone call to the English Language Department of Bakti Polytechnic. Based on the telephone communication, the Head of Department expressed her agreement to join the research project. The telephone communication was followed up with several email communications for a period of several months and the Head of Department of the English Language Department confirmed that she herself and another senior lecturer volunteered to join this research project. I saw this as a good start for the research project because, according to participatory action research philosophy, research is best to be carried out with people who are totally willing to be part of the research project as co-researchers (Heron & Reason, 2006).

In my first face-to-face meeting with the Head of English Language Department, I explained the design and timeline of the current study in great detail. She found the nature of the research project very interesting; however, looking at the design and the timeline of the study, she informed me that the other senior lecturer and herself were too busy to give constant commitment. One of her concerns was that she feared that she would not have ample time to concentrate on the research project due to her administrative duties.

To replace her, the Head of Department recommended two other lecturers to be involved in the research project (Research journal, 15 November 2010). They were Miss Siti and Miss Arfah (pseudonyms). Both were fresh graduates from a local university and had worked in Bakti Polytechnic for just two weeks at that time. Both had minimal teaching experiences, having only seven weeks of teaching experience that was part of the requirement of a practical course in their university studies.

Throughout the research project, the three of us worked as a team and will be referred to as the research team in this dissertation.

It was quite inappropriate to classify Siti and Arfah's participation in the research project as voluntary because their participation was as a result of the socio-cultural practices of the Malaysian setting. Siti and Arfah stated initially that they were willing to participate in the research project because they were interested with the aims and methodology used in the research project. However, at a later stage of this research project, when we had developed a closer relationship as a team, I learnt that their participation in the current research project was a result of a formal directive from the Head of the English Language Department (Arfah, personal communication, 2 February 2011). They informed me that, due to the active participation and high commitment required by the current study from the academic staff, it was quite difficult to find anyone who would voluntarily join the research project. The participation of Siti and Arfah was unfortunately a result of "persuasive coercion" (Heron & Reason, 2006, p. 151), which according to Heron and Reason could affect the values of the independence, collaboration and entirety of the project. However, I think this situation was an example of the influence of the socio-cultural practices of the Malaysian society such as hierarchical relationship between superiors and staff as well as between elders and young people (further detail was provided in Chapter 2). Siti and Arfah's roles were influenced by this element of persuasive coercion especially at the beginning of the research project where they played supportive roles and this point will be further elaborated in Chapter 6.

**Participants: Students as active contributors**

Ideally, students, who are the stakeholders in the teaching and learning environment, should be invited to be co-researchers in this research project (Baldwin, 2006; Heron & Reason, 2006); however, after careful deliberation, the research team decided that the students were invited to be active participants rather than co-researchers in this research project. This consideration was based on two factors; students' minimal experience with research and the examination-oriented learning culture.

All of the students were 17 years old and just graduated from secondary schools. They were in their first year of diploma programs and did not have any formal training on conducting research. Usually, students are trained to be involved in research activities during their final year of their university study. Since the students did not have a formal training on conducting research, the research team were concerned that the students' participation as co-researchers in the current study would have an undesirable impact on the students' academic performances. Malaysian teaching and learning process were mostly based on examinations and excellence in examinations was highly regarded by the community, teachers and students (Chia, 2011; Fung, 2010; Hwang & Muhammad Amin, 2007; Nadzrah, 2005; Tang & Abdul Ghani Kanesan, 2007). The research team was fully aware of the importance of academic excellence in the Malaysian society as we too had experienced the examination-based learning emphasis in our society. We fully understood the consequences of not excelling in examinations and agreed that any unwanted consequences pertaining to the students' academic performances as a result of their participation in this research project were best avoided.

After deliberation with the research team, Arfah's English as a Second Language (ESL) class in the Diploma of Civil Engineering was chosen to participate in this research project. The class ran for four hours a week, two hours on Monday afternoons and two hours on Wednesday mornings. The class in the beginning had 30 students; however, halfway through the research project two students decided to change their course, and were transferred to another ESL class. The students were all in their first year of the diploma program with their ages ranging from 17 to 18 years old. At the first meeting with the students, a short briefing regarding the research project was given. All students agreed to be part of the research project and signed the consent forms.

In order to get rich detailed data, a small number of students were invited to be the focus group (L. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2005; King & Horrocks, 2010). After the general briefing for all students, the research team asked 12 students to become members of the focus group. The selection process was conducted by Siti and Arfah while I was giving the general briefing regarding the research project to the whole class. They chose the focus group members based on the idea of selecting students who were most likely to be willing to share their learning experiences with the research team. It meant we were looking for students who appeared to be more assertive and less shy about expressing their opinions. The selection process was conducted within the first two hours of the first meeting between students and the research team and ultimately, the final selection criteria for the focus group was the students' willingness to join the research project. All invited students were given a separate briefing about the roles and responsibilities of the focus group and all invited students expressed their willingness to be in the focus



group. The focus group consisted of six female and six male students. Individual students will be referred to as S1 through to S12 in the dissertation to ensure they remain anonymous.

### **The researcher: Facilitator of participatory action research**

Facilitating a participatory action research project requires specific skills because it is an essential step in starting a participatory action research project (Baldwin, 2006; Cahill, 2007; Heron & Reason, 2006). Heron and Reason (2006) explained that facilitators of participatory action research need to have “skills in three ways of empowering others; cognitive and methodological empowerment, political empowerment, and emotional and interpersonal empowerment” (p.151). As a result, Heron and Reason (2006, p. 151) outlined three important issues to be considered by researchers in facilitating a participatory action research:

- the initiation of group members into the methodology of the inquiry so that they can make it their own;
- the emergence of participative decision making and authentic collaboration so that the inquiry becomes truly cooperative;
- the creation of climate in which emotional states can be identified, so that distress and tension aroused by the inquiry can be openly accepted and processed, and joy and delight in it and with each other can be freely expressed.

I provided the research team with documents containing essential information regarding participatory action research and a multiliteracies approach to ensure that the research team members were well equipped with knowledge of the methodology

and the subject matter of the research project as recommended by Heron and Reason (2006). The documents explained the nature of participatory action research and the cyclical research process involved in an action research project. In addition, the documents also talked about the concept of multiliteracies, the basis of why it was conceptualised and some ways to implement a multiliteracies approach in practice. The documents were relayed through emails one week prior to a professional discussion session so that Siti and Arfah had ample time to read and understand the documents. The information was then discussed in a professional discussion where I explained the concepts and important aspects of a multiliteracies approach and participatory action research. Siti and Arfah were encouraged to ask questions as well as share their thoughts and opinions on the subject matter. During the discussion process, I provided simple explanations and additional information to aid their understanding of the nature and methodology of the inquiry.

I also addressed the issue of providing emotional and interpersonal empowerment (Heron & Reason, 2006) through maintaining good rapport and relationship (Grant et al., 2008) within the research team. Swantz et al. (2006) pointed out that building rapport is essential in facilitating a participatory action research to avoid issues of power that are often the case in the traditions of a hierarchical community. Working in a hierarchical structure, throughout the research project, I assured the team that I was not an authoritative figure in the research project, but a co-researcher with similar status with the rest of the team. I had to consistently remind the team of this point to make sure that Siti and Arfah were comfortable working *with* me in the inquiry process rather than working *for* me. In addition, I also made sure that all professional discussions were conducted in an informal manner to create a warm and

pleasant atmosphere. The main objective of creating a pleasant atmosphere was to ensure that Siti and Arfah felt comfortable in expressing their thoughts and feelings freely. I also used informal language, which included a mixture of Bahasa Malaysia and the English language throughout the research project. These steps were taken in conjunction with Cahill's (2007) suggestion of providing a comfortable space to maintain good relationship among research team members.

In addition, I took necessary steps to ensure that the decision making process was truly shared by all research team members as Heron and Reason (2006) asserted that it is important for facilitators of a participatory action research to ensure that the inquiry process is truly collaborative. Firstly, I had to consistently stress the point that I was not an authoritative person in the research project. This was important because of the hierarchical structure within which we worked. Initially, both Siti and Arfah viewed me as the main researcher and they were working *for* me instead of *with* me (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). Secondly, I gave Siti and Arfah constant encouragement to express themselves freely without thinking of the consequences of their words and opinions because sometimes we Malays put importance on the words that we use because we believe that the wrong choice of words can hurt or offend people. In this case, I was trying to convince Siti and Arfah that I would not be offended with their words or when they expressed their opinions. The encouragement was done usually by asking their opinion towards the subject of discussion with questions such as 'what do you think about this?' Through this, I was hoping to make Siti and Arfah feel that they were invited to join in the discussion and their opinion matters. Thirdly, through sharing ideas and personal stories, I maintained a good relationship in order to bridge the power gap that we had

according to the traditional hierarchical structure. For example, one of the lecturers was having issues concerning her personal romantic relationship and shared her concerns with me. I took the opportunity to make our relationship closer by telling my own story of meeting my husband and how we ended up getting married. We had many instances of sharing personal stories. Although it might appear that this action of sharing personal stories was trivial and unrelated to the research project, but it helped to develop good and trusting relationships between the research team members. The trust we developed and our good relationships were translated into an improved collaborative effort among the team members (see Chapter 6). Even though initially due to our cultural values and backgrounds the research team turned to me to make final decisions, the decision making process became more collaborative as the research progressed (see Chapter 6).

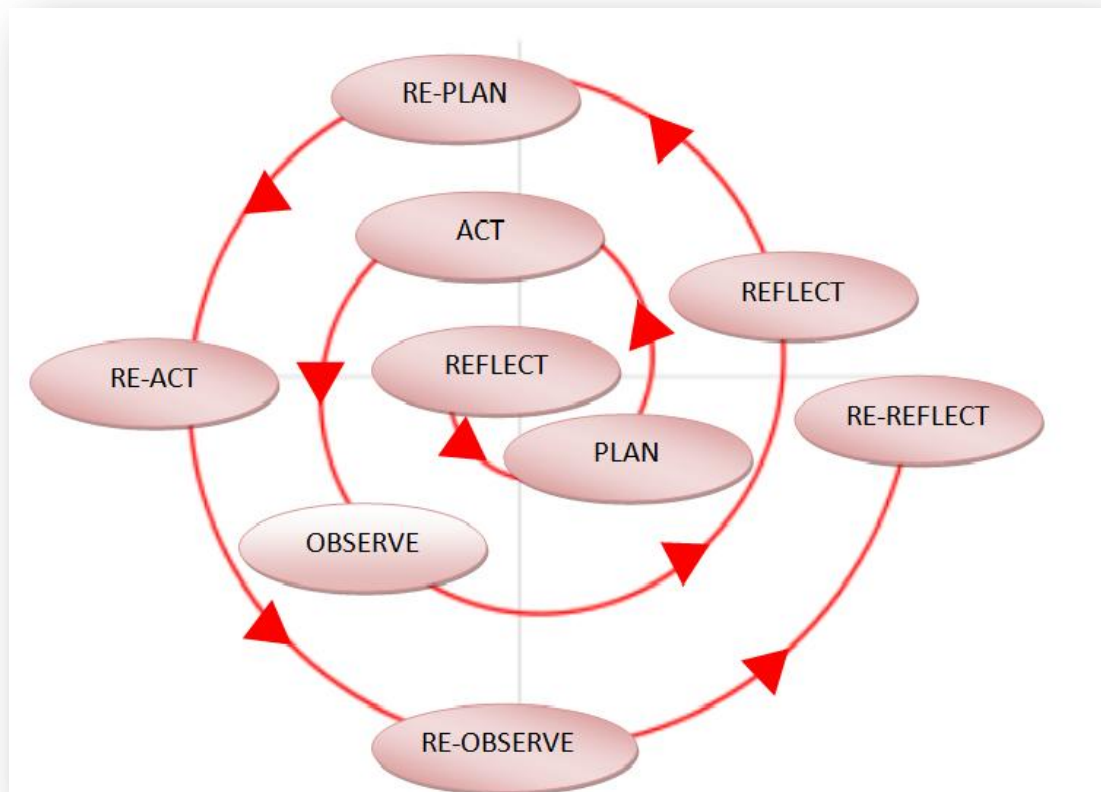
Apart from becoming the facilitator of the research project, I also studied the research team experiences of being involved in a collaborative research process. In the Multiliteracies Project, I was a co-researcher with Siti and Arfah. Then, in the Participatory Action Research Project, I stepped back and reflected on the research processes of the Multiliteracies Project. I looked at the research project from an aerial perspective, exploring the lecturers' experiences in participating in a participatory action research project. Over time, as the project progressed, I realized that my role in this layer was also changing. It was difficult to separate myself totally from the research project (Grant et al., 2008; Heron & Reason, 2006; Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 2005; Moore, 2004; Swantz, 2008), and I became more of a co-subject (Baldwin, 2006; Burgess, 2006) together with Siti and Arfah, because I was also

studying my own experiences in participating in a participatory action research project.

## **DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

Specifically, this study employed participatory action research spirals as featured in Figure 3.1. The inquiry process in the current study involved a recursive process consisted of action research processes of planning, action, observation and reflection stages. Figure 3. 1 shows that the inquiry process began with planning, action, observation and reflection, and the processes were repeated at the second cycle and labelled as re-plan, re-act, re-observe and re-reflect.

The overall duration of the research project was eight weeks. The first cycle began early December 2010 with the duration of four weeks. The first week of the first cycle was designated for planning and reflecting stage. Classroom teaching began on the second week of the first cycle. The second cycle began in January 2011 and ended four weeks later. The cycles of inquiry process of action and reflection in this research project, occurred at both the Multiliteracies Project and the Participatory Action Research Project.



*Figure 3.1* The action research process of the study. (Adapted from Hawkins, 2010, p. 19)

### **The design of the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project**

Figure 3.2 summarizes the action research process of the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project. The first cycle of the research process began with a reflection and planning stages. At this stage, I began the research process by reflecting on the current pedagogical approaches in the Malaysian educational scene from the point of view of the lecturers and students. As a research team, Siti, Arfah and I created a learning module that focussed on using the multiliteracies approach to learning English as a Second Language (ESL). Once the semester began, the learning approach was implemented. Due to the nature of action research process, the data collection and data analysis occurred concurrently. Students' responses and learning

experiences were observed and recorded and special attention was given to significant events. At the same time, the research team analysed data through a reflective practice framework.

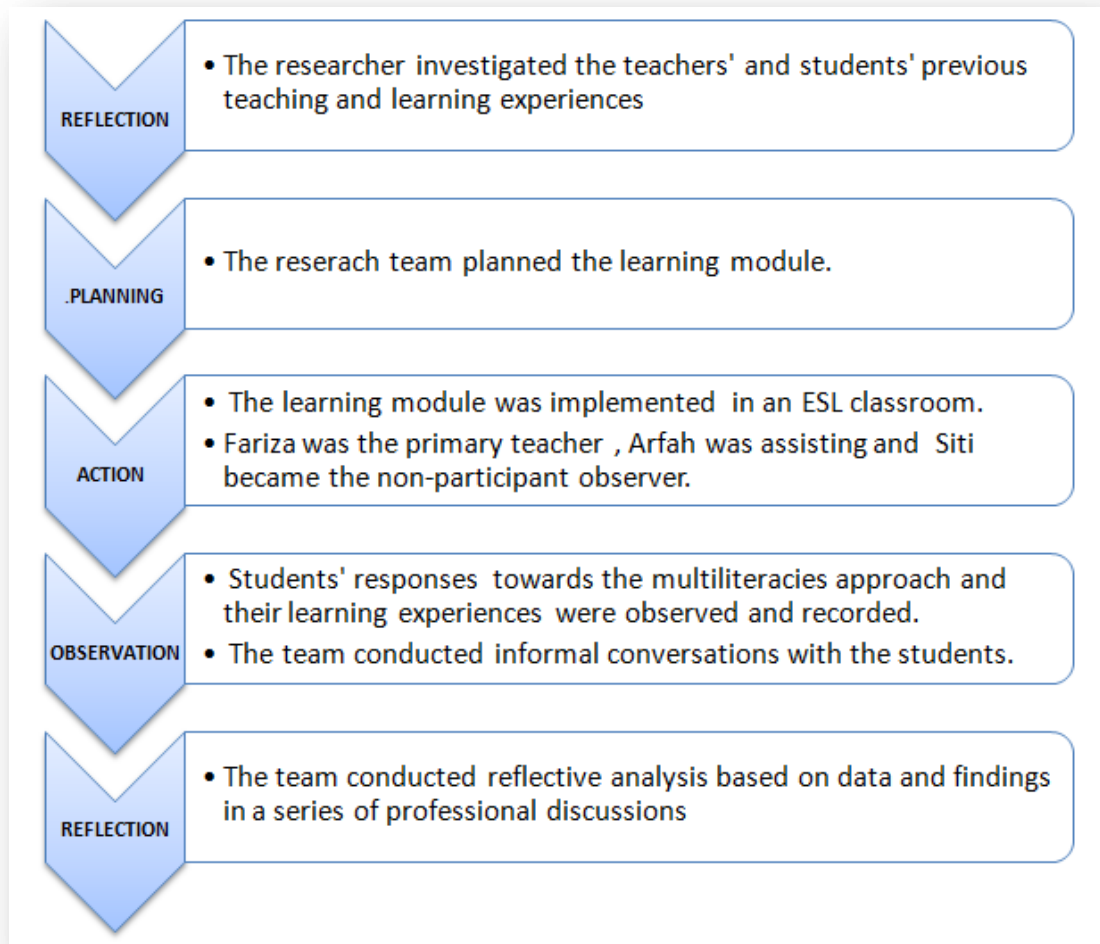


Figure 3.2 The research process of the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project

### ***Reflection and planning***

The reflection and planning stage began with a reflection on the current curriculum and classroom practices of a Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. This was done through an analysis of the current pedagogical practices in teaching ESL in Malaysian classroom based on literatures and Siti and Arfah's

previous teaching practices. Data was obtained through a semi-structured interview at the first meeting of the research team members. The students' previous learning experiences were also investigated through a written exercise, where the students' answered questions regarding their previous experiences of learning ESL. Based on the inquiry, it appeared that they had experienced teaching that used text books and hand-outs containing sample examination questions. The findings of this initial inquiry became the foundation for the research team to develop the multiliteracies module by comparing the current classroom practices with the components of multiliteracies approach which includes situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice.

The research team considered how to conduct the research including the number of action research cycles and the overall duration of the study. I acknowledge that action research usually requires the research process to be conducted in several cycles until practical solutions to the issue has been found. Weighing the constraints and the circumstances that we were facing at that time, the research team decided to conduct two cycles of action research process, which involved the first half of the semester. Our first concern was the limitations that we faced as the research team. I was a doctoral student under a strict working schedule due to the requirement of the sponsor of my study. Meanwhile, Siti and Arfah, as new teachers, also had to deal with tight working schedules. Our second concern was the students' academic performance. We were concerned that prolonged involvement in the research process would impact the students' academic performance indirectly especially for the focus group students. As a conclusion, we viewed that the duration of eight weeks was an ample time for us to get substantial data.



The next step in developing the multiliteracies module was to consider the governmental and institutional requirements. As indicated by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2006), all learning should incorporate the elements of soft skills from the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education's (2006) Soft Skill Model such as teamwork, communication and technological skills (Fariza & Yurni Emilia, 2012). We incorporated these skills in the multiliteracies projects. For example, teamwork skills were incorporated in both multiliteracies projects where the projects required the students to work in teams. In addition, the research team also considered Bakti Polytechnic's English Language Departments' policy. It was also essential to follow the syllabus set by the Department to ensure that the students would not be left behind as compared to all the other classes in the course and the students' performances in the examination would not be compromised in any way. To do this, we analysed the syllabus items set by the English Language Department and designed our multiliteracies module around the skills required. For example, the syllabus required the students to be able to ask questions in the English language. Therefore in our multiliteracies module we included lessons and learning activities that focussed on the topic of asking questions in English.

In developing the module, especially in designing the lessons, we also had to consider the institution's technological facilities. The classroom was not equipped with computers and Internet access. Therefore, we conducted the lessons in the computer laboratory. The English Language Department's computer laboratory was equipped with computers but it was not connected to the Internet. The connection process was estimated to be completed at the coming semester. Due to time constraints, we had to search for an alternative which was to use the computer

laboratory that was managed by other departments. Since access to the computer laboratory was shared with several departments in the polytechnic, we were able to book only for the two-hour lesson on Wednesdays.

Another important aspect in developing the module was considering the connection between the learning activities conducted in the language laboratory and activities conducted in the classroom. We had to make sure that all learning activities were taught using the multiliteracies approach. Learning activities that were conducted in the classroom focussed on the scaffolding process where we helped the students to understand certain concepts. For example, in the topic of conducting a mini research, the two- hour lesson in the classroom focussed on activities that introduced the concepts and language used in collecting data and presenting data findings. The lesson was then continued in the computer laboratory on Wednesday where students designed their questionnaires and analysed data using specific computer programs such as Microsoft Excel. Through this, even without access to technological resources, the lessons were successfully conducted using the multiliteracies approach.

### ***Action***

To implement the multiliteracies module, the team were posed with the question of who was going to teach the class. Siti and Arfah were concerned that their limited teaching experience would influence the result of the study indirectly, so the team decided that I was the most suitable person to be the primary teacher in the classroom. Arfah was assisting in all the lessons. However, due to a busy schedule, Siti was able to join only one session which was the Wednesday's two-hour lesson

conducted in the computer laboratory. Since she was not directly involved in the teaching, she took the role of a non-teaching observer, where she observed how the students negotiate learning using the multiliteracies approach as well as the students' responses towards the use of multiliteracies approach in the classroom.

### ***Observation***

At the observation stage, the research team observed and identified the ways students negotiate learning using our 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 team observed the students' language learning through the framework of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of learning and the multiliteracies pedagogy. Firstly, socio-cultural theory advocates that learning is mediated with semiotic tools. During the observation, we were looking at how the use of semiotic resources such as the multimodal texts used in our multiliteracies learning module influenced the students' learning. Socio-cultural theory also talks about the concept of scaffolding, in which a significant other or an expert facilitated students' learning based on the concept of zone of proximal development. Therefore, we observed how the process of scaffolding in our multiliteracies module enhanced the students learning. Next, the socio-cultural theory emphasizes the role of the students' social surroundings in the development of learning. It was important that we identified how the students' involvement in learning activities that provided opportunities for the students to interact with community members facilitated the learning process. Finally, we also observed how the multiliteracies learning activities develops active participation from students, a skill that is highly regarded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009b).

### ***Reflection***

At this stage, the students shared their experiences of learning using our multiliteracies learning module through several informal conversations with the research team. At the same time, the research team discussed and interpreted data collected in the observation phase as well as the students' reflections in a series of professional discussions. The team analysed data using a critical reflective analysis framework (Figure 3.8) to identify the students' experiences in learning using the multiliteracies approach. I developed this framework to analyse data based on the participatory action research emphasis on reflective practice. The first learning module was then revised based on these findings.

### **The first multiliteracies module**

Table 3.3 outlines the lesson for the first part of the multiliteracies module. The English language hours were scheduled for every Monday and Wednesday of the semester, and the duration of each session was two hours.

Table 3.3 Summary of the First Multiliteracies Module

WEEK	DAY	VENUE	TOPIC	OBJECTIVE
1	Planning and reflection process by the research team			
2	MONDAY	Classroom	Orientation	<p>To get to know the students.</p> <p>To provide brief description of the research project.</p> <p>To invite volunteers to be in the focus group.</p> <p>To describe the requirements of Multiliteracies Project 1.</p>
	WEDNESDAY	Classroom	Language and communication skills of meeting new people	<p>To use appropriate language and communication skills in meeting new people in formal and informal settings.</p> <p>To evaluate students' present knowledge on language and communication skills in meeting new people.</p> <p>To discuss issues of politeness in meeting new people.</p> <p>To build the students' confidence in speaking in front of people.</p>
3	MONDAY	Classroom	Forming questions in the English language.	To develop questions in English using Wh-questions and Yes/No question forms.
	WEDNESDAY	Computer laboratory	Creating network	To conduct a critical analysis on the design and features of the current social networking sites on the Web.
4	MONDAY	Classroom	Consultation	To be engaged in the activity of producing their group's career blog.
	WEDNESDAY	Computer laboratory	Presentation of the career blogs	<p>To share the students' career blogs with their classmates.</p> <p>To polish the students public speaking skills/ presentation skills.</p>

### ***Week 2***

The first week of the semester began with an orientation session and a formal learning session. The first session of the week was used as an orientation session, where teachers and students got to know each other. At this session, I also provided a thorough description of the multiliteracies project, and invited volunteers to be part of the focus group. The first formal lesson was conducted in the second session of the week; the main objective was to encourage the students to share their present knowledge regarding language and communication skills when meeting new people in formal and informal settings. To achieve this objective, the students were given a number of role play situations where they were required to start conversations with people in several formal and informal settings. In this lesson, Arfah and I used the students' existing knowledge to provide a provocation session on the issue of meeting new people, which included using appropriate salutations, language and communication skills that portray the elements of politeness according to the Malaysian culture. Through this provocation session, the students were able to evaluate their own existing knowledge about language and communications skills when meeting new people. As teachers, we helped them to experience and conceptualise the necessary language and communication skills in these situations.

### ***Week 3***

Concurrent with the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge processes (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004), the second week of the semester focused on using thinking skills such as conceptualising and analysing. To help students to conceptualize the notion of forming questions in the English language, I explained to the students the forms and functions of Wh-questions and Yes/No questions through a deductive teaching session. After a brief

explanation of the concepts of forming questions in the English language, the students were given practice questions. After all students appeared to have answered the practice questions, they were encouraged to share their answers with the class. Selected students then wrote their answers on the board, where the other classmates analysed their answers and chose which ones were acceptable and which ones needed amendments.

The second session of the week focused on providing a critical analysis opportunity, where students were engaged in activities that required higher order thinking skills, such as evaluating and analysing. In groups, students were requested to choose two social networking websites and analyse the designs and functions of each websites by describing and explaining which designs and functions featured in the social networking sites were appealing to them. The objective of this lesson was to encourage the students to make judgements and to justify their choices.

#### ***Week 4***

The third week was focused on supporting students directly in terms of providing consultation to help them complete their first multiliteracies project which 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 of two professionals. All groups were advised to interview people 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 a suitable and eye catching 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 with other polytechnic students. According to the initial plan, the blog's addresses would be posted on the Bakti Polytechnic's English Language Department's notice board. However, due to the outcome of the assignment, this final step did not occur.

A detailed lesson plan is attached in Appendix A.

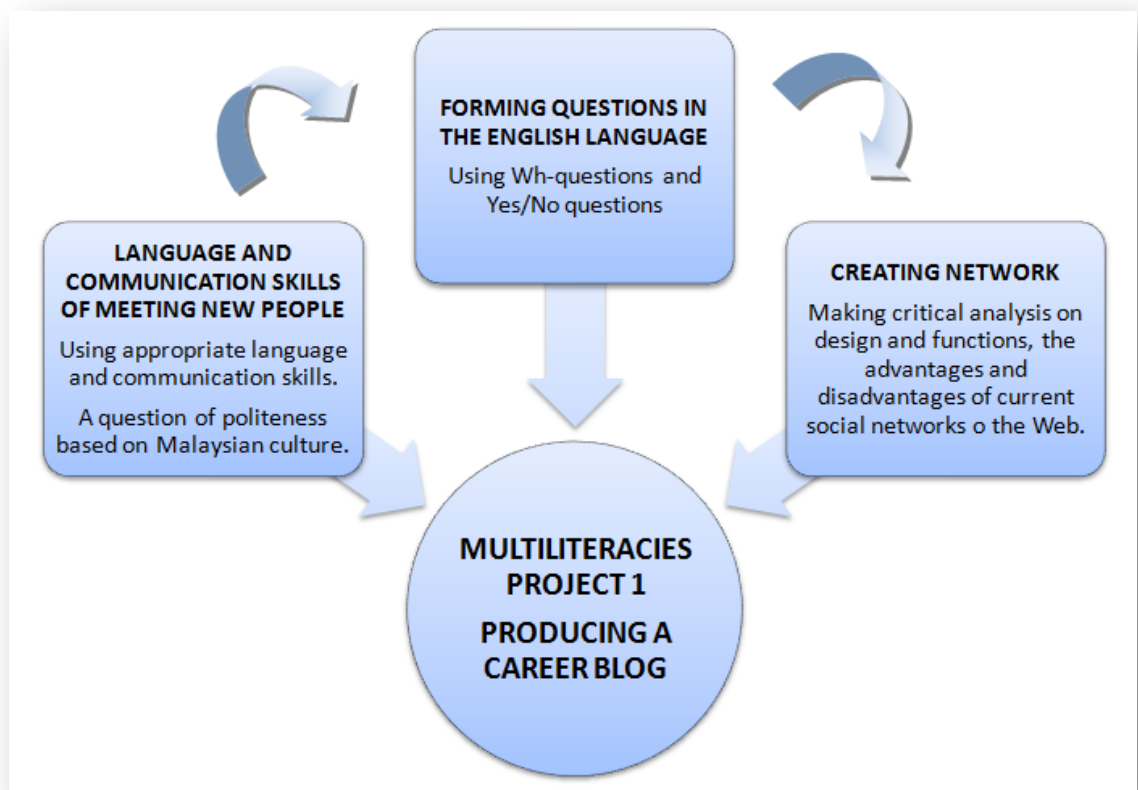
### ***The link between lessons to the first multiliteracies project***

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 of the lessons to the multiliteracies project is summarized in Figure 3.4. Each lesson provided the students with support and, information, as well as using their knowledge 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 two professionals. The students also learnt about the forms and functions of developing questions in the English language. 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 3.4* The connection of classroom lessons to the Multiliteracies Project 1

### **The second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project**

The second cycle of the research process involved the processes of re-plan, re-act, re-observe and re-reflect. The research steps are summarized by Figure 3. 5. In the

re-plan process, the research team revisited the reflective analysis done in the previous cycle through a professional discussion. In this discussion, we revised the multiliteracies module based on the reflective analysis which included discussing issues of developing prescriptive learning environment, building good relationships with the students and improving students' critical thinking skills.

The next step was implementing the multiliteracies module, where Arfah and I took the roles of teachers in the classroom. Siti remained as non-teaching observer such as in the previous cycle. During this process, we simultaneously observed the students' learning experiences. We made field notes, personal reflections and engaged in informal discussions with the students. We analysed students' learning experiences by having informal conversations among the research team members. In addition, two professional discussions were conducted to reflect on the data we collected. Finally, we carried out a reflective analysis, looking at data and findings from both cycles in the Multiliteracies Project. A feasible plan that consisted of significant components in fusing the students' cultural practices and multiliteracies approach was proposed.

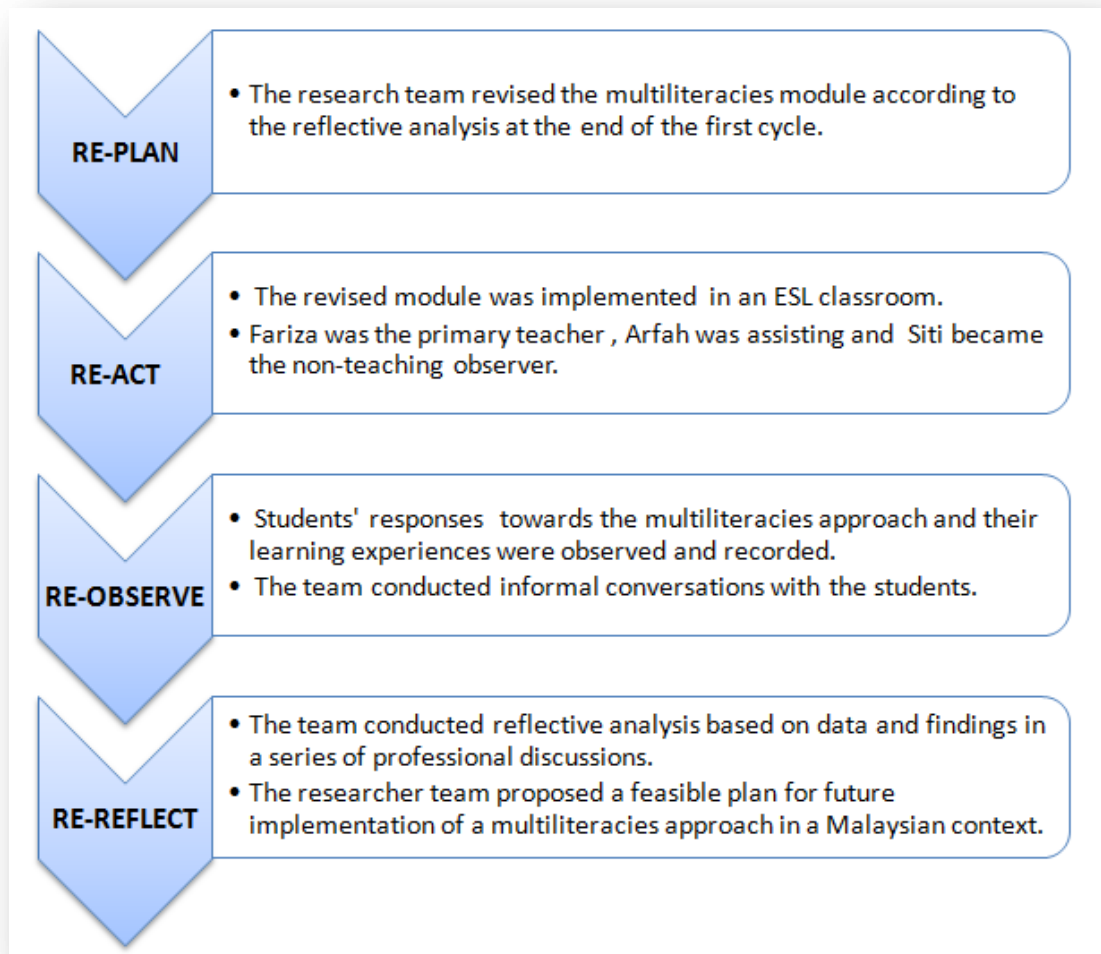


Figure 3.5: The research steps of the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Research Project

### ***The revised multiliteracies module***

The underlying philosophies of the second multiliteracies module were still the same as the philosophies of the first multiliteracies module. Our module still highlighted learning through the view of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and The New London Group's multiliteracies pedagogy (1996, 2000). In addition, the second part of the multiliteracies module was also based on the research team's reflections from the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Research Project, which included the points discussed in the planning section at the beginning of this chapter. Table 3.6 shows

the progression of the lessons for the second multiliteracies module and the connection to the New London Group's multiliteracies pedagogy.

Table 3.6: *The Summary of the Second Multiliteracies Module*

WEEK	DAY	VENUE	TOPIC	OBJECTIVE
1	MONDAY	Classroom	Critical analysis of the Multiliteracies Project 1.	To invite students to be critical in analysing their own practice. To Invite students to a paradigm shift in terms of learning.
			Description of Multiliteracies Project 2	To give vivid description regarding the requirements of Multiliteracies Project 2: Creating a documentary.
	WEDNESDAY	Classroom	Analysing an issue: Discussing multicultural issues through My Big Fat Greek Wedding & Fish Cheeks.	To analyse an issue critically.  To practice analysing, evaluating and synthesizing.
2	MONDAY	Classroom	Conducting a mini research: Mobile phones use among teenagers.	To generate general information regarding an issue.  To create survey or interview questions.  To analyse data from survey and interview.
	WEDNESDAY	Computer laboratory	Conducting a mini research : Mobile phones use among students in Class A.	To practice analysing data.  To practice synthesizing information through several sources.  Avoiding plagiarism through using your own words
3	MONDAY	Classroom	Consultation	To provide personalized consultation session to all students regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the issue on which they were researching on;</li> <li>the survey and interview questions;</li> <li>The recordings of their documentary.</li> </ul>
	WEDNESDAY	Computer laboratory	Movie Maker experience.	To share with the students a homemade video using Movie Maker software. To explore the features and functions of Movie Maker software.
4	MONDAY	Classroom	Consultation	To provide personalized consultation session to all students regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the issue that they were researching on;</li> <li>the survey and interview questions;</li> <li>The recordings of their documentary.</li> </ul>
	WEDNESDAY	Computer laboratory	PRESENTATION OF MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 2	To share their documentary with the class.

### ***The second multiliteracies project***

For the second multiliteracies project, the students were required to conduct a mini research project and present the findings of the research in the form of a documentary. To make it explicit to students, I used a local example, *Majalah 3* which is a news-like documentary equivalent to Australia's *A Current Affair* on *Win TV*. In groups of four, the students were required to conduct a mini research project on an issue within their community or campus. Students were expected to provide a brief explanation of the issue as a whole through reading relevant online articles. In addition, they were to distribute survey questions and interview community members in their quest to understand the issue further. Students were required to use their mobile phones, digital cameras or video cameras to produce a 15-minutes documentary. They had to choose their own style of presenting their documentary; they could opt to have a formal, informal, relaxed or contemporary style of presentation.

### ***Week 1***

The first week of the second cycle began with a critical analysis of the students' first multiliteracies project, which was to produce career blogs. The main purpose of this activity was not to highlight the mistakes that the students had made in their first project, but to encourage the students to be critical and analyse their own practice. This was our first step to cultivate critical thinking among the students. Instead of telling the students directly of the outcomes of their first multiliteracies project, Arfah and I opened a discussion by allowing the students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own practices. Then, based on the students' responses, we invited the students to analyse their practices and give practical solutions that they

thought would work in those circumstances. In alignment with the critical analysis activity, we ended the discussion by inviting the students to keep an open mind about learning using a more contemporary learning approach as presented in our multiliteracies module. We also encouraged the students to constantly express and share their experiences in learning using the multiliteracies module.

After the one-hour critical analysis, we explained the requirements of the second multiliteracies project. After consideration of the reflective analysis conducted within the first cycle of the research project, we decided to make our lessons more prescriptive, we had also provided the students a written description of the second multiliteracies project. The written document supported our detailed explanation about the requirements of the second multiliteracies project, which was to conduct a mini research on an issue within their community. We gave step-by-step guidance to the students on how to complete the assignment from forming the group to choosing the topic and presenting the end result. In addition, we also provided specific examples on the topics that the students could explore for their mini research activity. We listed five issues which included the Automated Teller Machine (ATM) service in Bakti Polytechnic, Information and Technology (IT) facilities in Bakti Polytechnic, the cleanliness of Poly Beach, social issues within Bakti Polytechnic and cafeteria issues within Bakti Polytechnic. The written document is attached in Appendix B.

The second lesson of the first week was focussed on cultivating students' critical thinking skills. We invited the students to analyse a multicultural issue through working on two multimodal texts, the first one was an excerpt from a movie and the

second an excerpt from a short story. The movie excerpt was from the film ‘My Big Fat Greek Wedding’ (Zwick, 2001) and the print text was ‘Fish Cheeks’ from A. Tan (1987). The short story ‘Fish Cheeks’ is based on Amy Tan’s personal experiences and her own dilemmas of being a Chinese girl living in the United States of America, and how she is caught up between two cultures. Meanwhile the movie ‘My Big Fat Greek Wedding’ tells the story of Tula’s dilemmas, a traditional Greek girl who fell in love with Ian, a modern American man. The movie portrays the cultural differences and cultural clashes that happened between Tula’s family and her fiancée’s family in the process of planning their wedding. The lesson focussed on answering a few comprehension questions and was followed by a discussion of identifying the issues discussed in both texts. In addition, we encouraged the students to find similar instances or evidences of similar issues in their own lives.

### ***Week 2***

Lessons in the second week focussed on the topic of conducting research. The main objective of these lessons was to train the students in basic research skills such as generating information, creating a survey, devising interview questions, and carrying out data analysis. In order to do this, we engaged the students in a hands-on activity where they conducted a mini research activity in the classroom. In groups, students were asked to research the issue of mobile phones use among teenagers in their class. Each group was given a specific topic to work on such as popular brand choice for mobile phones, the functions of the mobile phones most used, and future physical and functional expectations of mobile phones. They were also guided to create five survey questions and one interview question for them for distribution to their



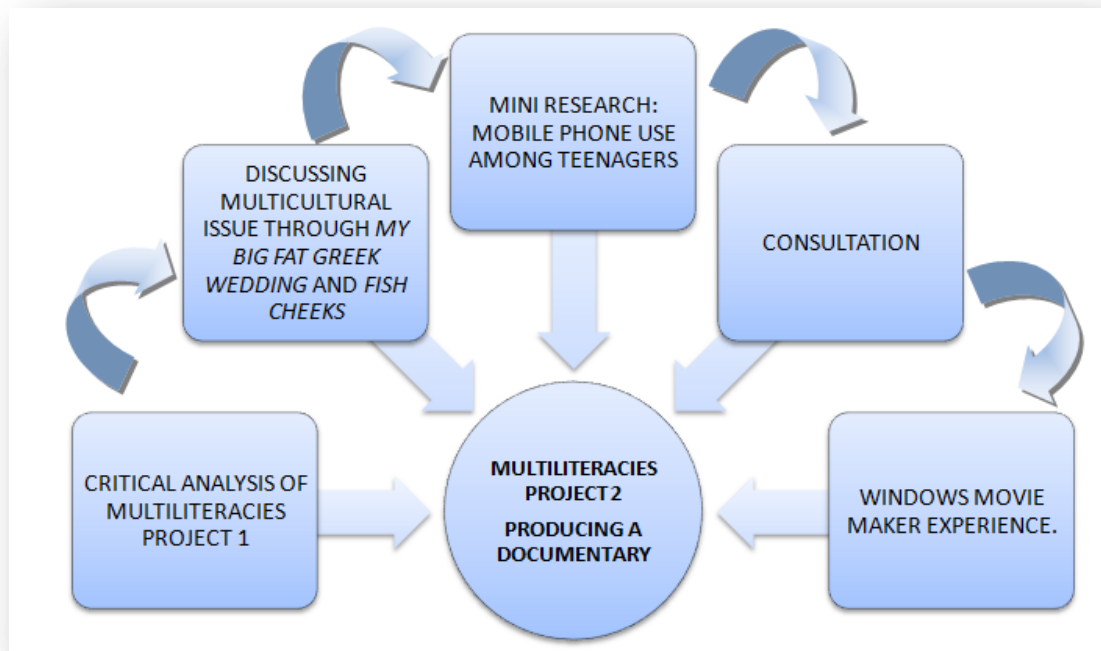
classmates. Later, we assisted the students to analyse the data, and the students then presented their findings to the class.

### ***Week 3 and 4***

The third and fourth weeks were allocated specifically for consultations in our quest to have more dialogues and interaction with the students. In the third week, in order to be prescriptive, I conducted an instructive lesson on how to use the Movie Maker software. Here, Arfah and I explained to the students about the Movie Maker software and showed them the specific functions of the software such adding videos from mobile phones to the computer, and arranging the videos as well as inserting captions. I also shared my own homemade video using mobile phones and Movie Maker software. In other consultation sessions, we provided personalized consultations to students, discussing issues related to the completion of their second multiliteracies project. Prior to these sessions, students were asked to submit a formal progress report. Arfah and I talked to the students in their groups to specifically address the issue that they had raised in their progress reports.

The detailed lesson plan is included in Appendix C.

Similar to the first part of the multiliteracies module, the lessons in the second part of the module were also designed to support the students in completing the project. The connections of the lessons of the second multiliteracies module are summarized in Figure 3.7.



*Figure 3.7* The connection of the lessons of the second part of the multiliteracies module to the second multiliteracies project.

### **The design of the Participatory Action Research Project**

Meanwhile, at the outer layer of the study, in order to explore the teachers' experiences involving in a participatory action research process, I followed the cyclical structure of the action research process. At the planning stage, I reflected on the current literatures on participatory action. At the action stage, Siti, Arfah and I became collaborative research partners and made shared decisions throughout the project. At the observation stage, I became a participant observer (Cresswell, 2005) to observe and document the team's professional conversations. I was an active participant in the professional conversations, so I gained personal insights into the teachers' experiences. These conversations were audio recorded to be reviewed at a later time. Useful data such as the teachers' responses, reactions and interaction during the professional conversations were also documented. I also kept a personal

journal to record my own reflections on my experiences as a co-researcher in the research project. Finally, at the reflection stage, I analysed data collected at the observation stage, including my journal entries. In addition, I also obtained the teachers' reflections on their experiences in a participatory action research project through semi-structured interviews and I also noted significant points based on the documents.

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

In identifying the teachers' and students' experiences while engaging in this research project, this study used ethnographic methods to collect data. In order to get an emic perspective of the teachers' and students' experiences, it was important for me to be immersed in their cultural contexts as a participant rather than as an outside observer (Cousin, 2009; O'Reilly, 2005). In addition, to ensure the trustworthiness of data in a qualitative research, the data for this research project were collected through multiple channels (Berg, 2007; Cousin, 2009).

### **Observation**

To understand the lecturers' and students' experiences in their own cultural contexts, data were collected through close observation of the students' and lecturers' experiences in the research project. During the Multiliteracies 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.

Meanwhile, during the Participatory Action Research Project, the lecturers' research experiences were observed throughout the research project. I assumed the role of a participant observer to see experiences from the views of the participants (Creswell, 2005; Philips & Stawarski, 2008). Through participant observation, I was also able to develop strong rapport and trusting relationship among the lecturers which were important to elicit data from the participants (Cousin, 2009; Heron & Reason, 2006).

### **Research journal**

The research journal was another important data collection tool. The research journal is different from observation methods because it was not only used to record data collected from the field but also a platform for me as a researcher to reflect on the data as well as the research process throughout the research project (Borg, 2001). I recorded my reflections on what was happening in the classroom. I made notes in between intervals between teaching and while students were preparing themselves for certain tasks. Most of the times, the reflections were made after the class ended by analysing the observational notes.

Additionally, I kept the journal to record my observations and reflections of Siti and Arfah's experiences in participating in this participatory action research. Since, I was also the co-subject (Baldwin, 2006) in this research project; I also recorded my own experiences in becoming a co-researcher with the lecturers.

### **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.

### **Audio and video recording**

To supplement data from the observations, video and audio data were also collected. To document the students' language learning experiences, their learning activities in the classroom were recorded using a digital video camera. King and Horrocks (2010) noted that the use of video recording has a few constraints especially in terms of the perspective in which the video camera captures the learning situation. Due to the participatory nature of this study, the lecturers and I were actively involved in the teaching process, thus it was quite difficult to man the video camera exclusively. So, the video camera was set prior to the lesson to record the classroom learning as a whole. In other words, the digital video camera recorded the learning process from a single perspective, which according to Cousin (2009), is quite similar to the 'eye of a live observation' (p.122). The video data were used when the research team needed to revisit the classroom during our professional discussions.

Audio recordings were made during the research teams' professional discussions, informal conversations with the students, and semi-structured interviews with the teachers. In making an audio recording, King and Horrocks (2010) suggested the use

of digital appliances such as a digital recorder because the device could provide a better quality recording and the data could later be transferred to a computer. The digital audio data were transferred into a computer for verbatim transcription process.

### **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 our classroom observation. 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. To ensure that language would not be a barrier for the students to express their thoughts and opinions, the students were given the freedom to express their views and opinions in their national language, Bahasa Malaysia, or the English language. This raised the question of accurate interpretation which is discussed in a later section of this chapter.

I was also involved in informal conversations with the teachers to document their experiences in implementing multiliteracies pedagogy in their classroom. These informal conversations always involved Arfah and me, since we conducted the class together. At the end of each lesson, it was customary for us to be engaged in an informal chat that focussed on issues that emerged from our teaching and learning process at the end of each lesson. I decided to note important points of the conversations in my journal rather than making an audio recording because of the nature of these conversations. The conversations were often informal and

spontaneous and almost felt like two friends chatting away; sharing ideas and feelings about their teaching. I was concerned that the presence of an audio recorder would have an impact on the spontaneity of the conversation and might affect the value of the data.

### **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' reaction papers, where students were required to write their reflections on the activities done in the classroom. The students' career blogs and documentaries were also collected as data. All these data were analysed by the research team in a series of professional discussions throughout the research project.

### **Semi- structured interviews**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the Siti and Arfah at critical points to understand how they perceived their experiences in implementing multiliteracies pedagogy and participating in the participatory action research project (Charmaz, 2003; Cousin, 2009; Fontana & Frey, 2005; King & Horrocks, 2010; Philips & Stawarski, 2008). I chose semi-structured interviews because this method of interviewing gave me the freedom to ask pre-determined questions as well as to venture into areas arising from the significant events and participants' answers

(Berg, 2007; Cousin, 2009; King & Horrocks, 2010). The interviews were carried out three times throughout the research project: at the beginning of first cycle, at the intersection of the first cycle and cycle two, and finally at the end of the research project. All the interviews were conducted at Bakti Polytechnic and the average duration of each interview was one hour.

## **DATA ANALYSIS METHOD**

The main data analysis for the data collected in the current research project was critical reflective analysis. Reflective practice is often used in the improvement of teaching and learning (e.g., Macfarlane et al., 2006; Noble, 2007; York-Barr et al., 2006). Osmond and Darlington (2005) used reflective data analysis as a means of collecting data where they engaged their participants in a series of critical analysis related to the participants' own practice. For example, in investigating the implications for knowledge-based practice among ten social workers in a statutory child-protection context, Osmond and O'Connor (2006) used reflective recall as one of the data collection, in which the researchers presented their observational notes to the participant and requested the participants to explain the reasons for her language and actions. Osmond and Darlington (2005) argued that critical reflective techniques were useful in eliciting data especially in professional supervision area.

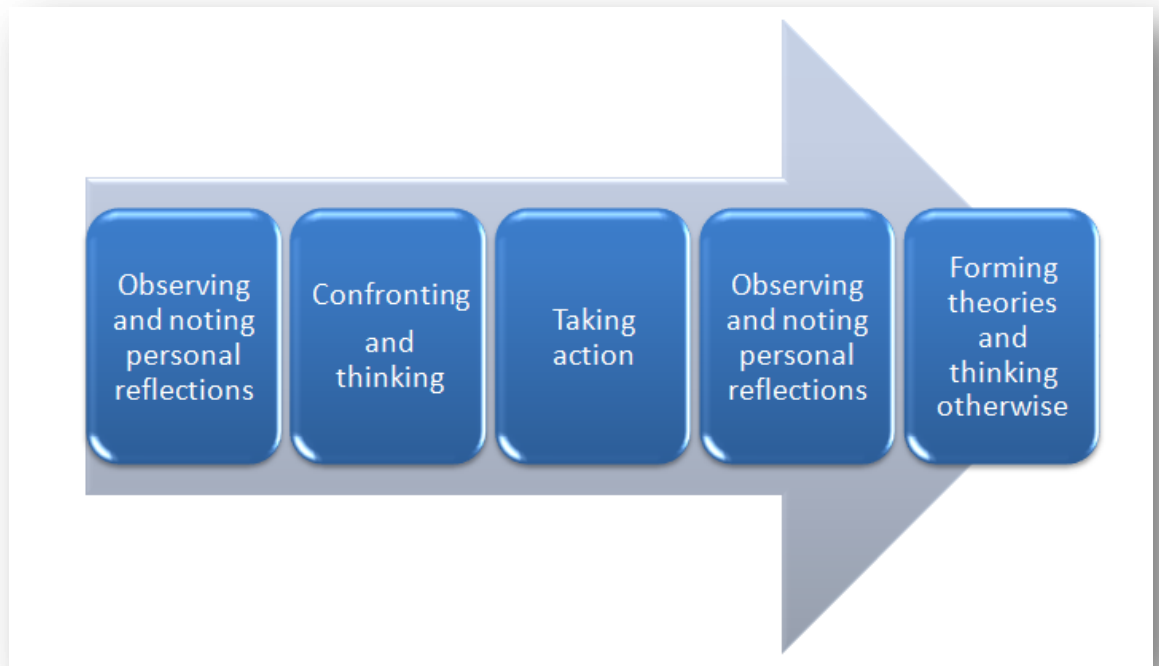
In the case of this research project, critical reflective analysis was adopted as the data analysis method after considering two significant points that were closely related and inter-dependent with each other. The first point was the important role of reflection and action in a participatory action research. 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. The second point was that the current research projects dealt with issues of teaching and learning where reflective practice has been seen as the a catalyst for improvement (Macfarlane et al., 2006; Noble, 2007; Osmond & Darlington, 2005; York-Barr et al., 2006). One of the main objectives of this research project was to trial the implementation of multiliteracies approach and to improve the approach in a Malaysian learning context based on the students' learning experiences. The following section describes how the analysis was conducted at Multiliteracies Project and the Participatory Action Research Project.

For the purpose of analysing data for the current research project, I developed my own critical reflective practice steps based on York-Barr et al.'s (2006) reflective practice model and Macfarlane et al.'s (2006) four-step model in developing reflective practice skills (see Appendix D). To recapitulate, York-Barr et al., describes reflective practice as an active process (p.11). They asserted that reflective practice is a multifaceted process that requires high levels of conscious thought and commitments to transform current practices based on fresh understandings. This notion was reflected in their Reflective Practice model where *inquiry*, *thinking* and *learning* are associated together to produce action and improve teaching and learning system. Meanwhile, Macfarlane et al. (2006) emphasized the role of *deconstructing*, *confronting*, *theorizing* and *thinking otherwise* in developing critical reflective skills. I was especially interested in their importance of theorising and thinking otherwise concept where reflective practitioners related practice to theories using multiple perspectives.

Figure 3.8 shows the Critical Reflective Analysis Steps that were used in analysing data in the current research project. The five steps involved were *observing and noting personal reflections*, *confronting and thinking*, *taking action*, *observing and noting personal reflections*, and *forming theories and thinking otherwise*.



*Figure 3.8* Critical reflective analysis steps (based on Macfarlane, et al., 2006 and York-Barr et al., 2006)

### ***Observing and noting personal reflections***

York-Barr et al. (2006) suggested that each reflective practice phase required a *pause*, which creates a space in which “presence and openness can emerge” (p. 9). At this stage, York-Barr et al. described that this space is a precursor to “conscious deliberative thought, response and action” (p.10). In the case of the research project, the first step of analysis resembled this pause because we provided a room that allowed data to be analysed at a personal level before a group discussion. It gave the

researchers space to note their own individual reflections on what was happening and any significant events.

### ***Confronting and thinking***

Macfarlane et al. (2006) stated the ability to confront aspects of practice as being significant when conducting a critical reflective analysis. They advocated that the researcher ask questions regarding their own practice. York-Barr et al. (2006) indicated that the questioning and confronting of the researcher's own practices should be followed with thinking. They defined thinking as "the active, deliberate, and conscious processing of thoughts for examining goals, beliefs and practices" (p.10). In the current research project, the second step of the reflective practice required the research team to confront the issues surrounding our practices by asking questions about these practices. Each member shared their personal observation and reflections on significant events. Then we questioned and thought about the situation and identified issues arising from the implementation of the multiliteracies approach. At this stage, all members confronted and thought about the issues by considering multiple perspectives including theoretical, practical, and socio-cultural perspectives. The result of thinking is learning (York-Barr et al., 2006), in which case through this step we learnt about significant issues related to implementing a multiliteracies approach to learning in the Malaysian context.

### ***Taking action***

The most important step in embarking on a critical reflective analysis was taking action after reflection. York-Barr et al. (2006) argued that reflective practice will only lead to improvement if it is followed by better understandings and action. The

importance of action after reflection was discussed by Dewey (1983) who argued that application of knowledge is essential in the reflective practice process. This was an essential step in this research project where practical solutions to issues were identified and implemented in practice.

### ***Observing and noting personal reflections***

After implementing the practical solutions, it was also significant to have another space to analyze and make personal reflections on the implications of the amendments carried out earlier. Another round of *observing and noting personal reflections* was an important step in this framework as it allowed another intentional space for the researchers to conduct reflective analysis of their practices.

### ***Forming theories and thinking otherwise***

This step was about analysing the issues raised in the thinking and confronting step as well as reflections from the previous step. Macfarlane et al. (2006) advocated that confronting and thinking about one's own practice was linked to the ability to theorise. They further asserted that the link between theory and practice is essential and all reflective practice "must be underpinned by a solid understanding of theory" (p.18). At this stage, we as researchers, looked at the issues and formulated or generalized the issue in relation to similar situations. It was also important to consider other options or other perspectives on the issue. Macfarlane et al. (2006) argued it is important to think about practice in multiple perspectives because one single practice might have multiple interpretations and meanings. Osmond and Darlington (2005) also stated that the most valuable features of "critical reflective approach is its ability to transcend and engage with difference –in that different

knowledge, ideas, speculations, feelings and theories can be ascertained reflectively from a range of positions” (p.3).

The following section will explain how a critical reflective analysis steps were realized in the data analysis stage of the current research project.

### **Data analysis in Multiliteracies Project**

Data analysis was concurrent with the data collection process. Once the multiliteracies module was implemented, data analysis was begun by using the critical reflective analysis framework. Table 3.9 describes the critical reflective analysis process that occurred at the Multiliteracies Project stage.

Table 3.9 *Summary of the Critical Reflective Analysis Steps in Multiliteracies Project*

<b>CRITICAL REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS STEPS</b>	<b>MULTILITERACIES PROJECT'S DATA ANALYSIS</b>
<b>Observing and noting personal reflections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research team observed students' responses and learning process and made personal reflections.</li> <li>• The research team also made personal reflections on any significant events.</li> </ul>
<b>Confronting and thinking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research team shared their personal reflections with all group members.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• The team searched for patterns and potential themes (Cohen et al., 2007; Mertler, 2006; Thomas, 2006) which emerged from the reflections to describe how the multiliteracies approach contributed to the students' language experiences.</li> </ul>
<b>Taking action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research team provided solutions to issues identified in the earlier steps and implemented the suggested solutions in the second implementation of the multiliteracies module.</li> </ul>
<b>Observing and noting personal reflections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research team once again engaged in personal observation and reflections on the students' learning process and responses towards the amendments made to the multiliteracies module.</li> </ul>
<b>Forming theories and thinking otherwise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through this final step in the critical reflective framework, the team analysed data with a broader perspectives of formulating what had happened and how it influenced future implementation of the multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning contexts.</li> <li>• Data were classified into categories and possible themes. The team then identified the patterns and generated guidelines for future implementations of the multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning contexts.</li> </ul>

### Data Analysis in Participatory Action Research Project (PARP)

The data analysis was conducted concurrently with the data collection. Table 3.9 shows the critical reflective analysis that occurred in the Participatory Action Research Project.

Table 3.10 *Summary of the Critical Reflective Steps in Participatory Action Research Project*

<b>CRITICAL REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS STEPS</b>	<b>PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT'S DATA ANALYSIS STEPS</b>
<b>Observing and noting personal reflections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I noted significant events in the professional discussions through my observation notes and journal entries.</li> </ul>
<b>Confronting and thinking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I identified significant points that emerged from my personal reflections on the collaborative effort of the team members as well as from the verbatim transcription of the semi-structured interviews with the teachers.</li> <li>• Data were classified into categories and possible themes.</li> <li>• I provided a few practical solutions to improve the participatory action research process.</li> </ul>
<b>Taking action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I implemented practical solutions to improve the collaborative efforts of the research team.</li> </ul>
<b>Observing and noting personal reflections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once again, I made personal observation and reflections on the collaborative process of the research team.</li> </ul>
<b>Forming theories and thinking otherwise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I looked at the data from a broader perspective.</li> <li>• I explored how the philosophy of participatory action research was realized in our collaborative research effort and how the socio-cultural background of the research team's influenced the research process and outcomes.</li> <li>• Then, I searched for patterns and underlying themes (Cohen et al., 2007; Mertler, 2006; Thomas, 2006) that had emerged from the transcribed data, the journal entries and the critical reflective analysis to identify the teachers and my own experiences in engaging in a participatory action research.</li> <li>• Finally, I formulated a guideline of what were the important and significant points to be considered when conducting a participatory action research in a Malaysian context.</li> </ul>

## **Transcription and translation**

Since the research project was conducted in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, some of the data were in the English language and some were in Bahasa Malaysia. Classroom artefacts such as the career blogs, reaction papers and documentaries were mostly in the English language because they were part of the course's assessment. In presenting these data in the dissertation, the original language used including the language with grammatical errors were retained in order to reflect the authenticity of the data. Informal conversations were mostly in Bahasa Malaysia because the research team encouraged the students to express themselves in a language that they were comfortable with. Forcing or imposing the idea of expressing themselves in the English language was likely to invite undesirable response from the students and would restrict the richness of the data. Meanwhile data collected from the teachers in the interviews and professional discussions were a mixture of the English language and Bahasa Malaysia. The interviews and the professional discussions were conducted in an informal environment thus the teachers were more comfortable in expressing themselves in both Bahasa Malaysia and the English language.

Data in Bahasa Malaysia were not translated to the English language in the analysis stage to maintain the meaning that was communicated by participants. Only data that were presented in this dissertation were translated into the English language to assist understanding of dissertation readers. All data were transcribed verbatim. According to Easton, McCornish, and Greenberg (2000), errors in transcription should be minimized to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative data and they recommended that the interviewer becomes the transcriber. In the case of this research project, the



audio data was transcribed by me. I decided to transcribe the data on my own because I thought that the process provided me room to understand the data further and prompt deeper thinking on the subject matter (Matheson, 2007). The transcriptions were also reviewed several times by listening to the audio files and checking the transcription to ensure accuracy, as recommended by Easton et al. (2000). Since the current study focussed on what were said by the participants rather than how they said it, the transcription was done using a play-script style approach (Midgley, 2010). Midgley (2010) stated that through this approach of transcribing audio data, contextual characteristics such as pauses, intonation, and hesitations that were present in the actual conversation were lost. However, in my context, I transcribed data based on the notion of investigating what the participants had to say regarding their experiences. Since, most of the participants and I were from a similar language background, the transcription process were not difficult. I had minimal problems in understanding the audio data.

I am aware that doing transcription and translation is an act of negotiation which usually involves interpretation and representation of others (Lapadat, 2000; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1998, 1999; Temple & Young, 2004). To address this issue, I acknowledged that the transcriptions and translations were from the perspective of the research team. The team made conscious decisions about how the data were represented by considering textual references as well as the sociolinguistic contexts. Since all the research team members were fluent speakers of Bahasa Malaysia and shared common socio-cultural backgrounds with the students, any discrepancy of meaning between the original text to the translated and transcribed texts was minimized.

## **ETHICS OF THE STUDY**

### **Ethics approval**

This study had followed long procedural steps prior to the execution of this research project in ensuring that it complied with ethical rules and guidelines. First, I applied for approval from the site of the research. I submitted a letter together with the summary of my research proposal and estimated timeline of the study to the Director of Bakti Polytechnic to obtain approval to conduct research in the institution. Bakti Polytechnic agreed to be the site of research. Secondly, with a letter of approval from the Director of Bakti Polytechnic, I applied for a research permit from the Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister Office of Malaysia for the research project to be conducted in Malaysia. Finally, I applied for approval from the University of Southern Queensland Research Ethics Committee (Approval number H10REA112). This involved a submission of a formal application including necessary documents such as the research design of the study, sample of consent forms for the participants, approval letter from the site of research, samples of questions asked and the estimated timeline of the study. After revising the application, USQ's Research Ethics Committee approved the application. I distributed consent forms which contained information and summary of the research project to all participants (Appendix E and F). All participants signed and returned the consent forms before the research project began.

### **SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter have explained the context of the current study which included the selection of the research site, the roles of the lecturers as co-researchers and students

as active participants, and the researcher's role as a facilitator of a participatory action research project. This chapter also outlined the research design, data collection tools and data analysis techniques of the Multiliteracies Project and Participatory Action Research Project. This chapter concluded with the ethics related requirements undertaken to conduct this study.

The next chapter will explain the data from the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project, in which the research team investigated the implementation of multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning context through the students' experiences.

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **THE FIRST ATTEMPT AT IMPLEMENTING A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH IN A MALAYSIAN LEARNING CONTEXT: A FAILURE OR A TRIAL RUN?**

### **PREVIEW**

Chapter 3 elaborated the context, action research processes, data collection methods, and data analysis tools, as well as the ethics of Multiliteracies Project and the Participatory Action Research Project.

Chapter 4 will focus on the findings of the action research processes of the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project. The discussion will be structured according to the participatory action research process that includes planning, action, observation and reflection. The discussion will focus on the socio-cultural perspective of how the students' cultural background and practices were influencing the way they negotiated learning through the multiliteracies approach.

## REFLECTING AND PLANNING A MULTILITERACIES

### CLASSROOM

#### Malaysian learning contexts based on the lecturers' and students' previous learning experiences

Data shows that there was an over-emphasis on the teaching of reading and writing due to its relation to preparing the students for the examination. In Extract 4.1, S1 stated that she was involved in learning activities that focussed on reading and writing exercises that prepared her for the examination. Her statement was also supported by S14, when she claimed that she had to do a lot of examination practice questions before the examination.

#### Extract 4.1

S1: *The student just have to do exercises and do a lot of readings. Other than that, the teacher teach based on textbooks and exam oriented.*

S14: *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*

Siti and Arfah also indicated the over-emphasis on reading and writing activities in Malaysian learning contexts based on their supervised-teaching experiences during their degree study. Siti stated that she was required by her mentor to conduct more writing activities in the classroom as evidenced in her statement “*umm, actually I was asked by my mentor to teach writing skills more, rather than other skills such as listening and speaking*” (Interview, 24 November 2010). Arfah was not required to teach writing skills by her mentor, but she noted (see Extract 4.2) that her mentor had completed the writing curriculum herself. It seems that the writing curriculum was regarded as important as it has been completed by the senior teacher before handing the class to a trainee teacher.

**Extract 4.2**

Arfah: *As for me, it was more like, I got to plan my own activities freely, because my mentor did not mind about following the syllabus that much. Basically, I engaged the students in communicative skills, less on writing, because the previous teacher had covered all the writing components.*

*Interview, 24 November 2010*

It seems that teachers dominated the learning in the classrooms while students seemed to be passive receivers of knowledge. In Extract 4.3, S1 stated that usually, teachers provide all of the information in the classroom and this statement was supported by S10. S5 and S15 described the students' role in the classroom in which students sit quietly and listen to what the teacher says. This situation really described the cultural practices of most Malaysian learning contexts where teachers are seen as provider of knowledge and students listen attentively as a sign of respect to the teachers (Aminuddin et al., 2010; Fung, 2010; Holmes, 2004; Novera, 2004).

**Extract 4.3**

S1: *The usual English classroom scenario are the teacher provide all the information needed.*

S5: *Teacher teaching in front and I listen and sometimes my teacher ask anyone she want.*

S10: *My usual classroom before this are the teacher gives all the information and answering skills to excel in examination.*

S15: *When my teacher starting teaching us, all of people sitting quietly and hearing (listening to) what my teacher speak.*

*Classroom artefact, 8 December 2010*

Meanwhile, teaching materials used in most classrooms were still focused on the use of print-based resources. In Extract 4.4, Arfah stated that she used mah-jong papers to write notes and paste the mah-jong paper on the white board of the class in her teaching. Siti also mentioned a similar use of print-based resources in her teaching when she stated “*What I usually did was, I would prepare this format of an essay, write it on a mah-jong paper and paste it on the board and let the students have a*

look at the format of the essay, terms and words that they can use” (Interview, 24 November 2010).

**Extract 4.4**

Arfah: *Yeah. So, every time I go into class, I would bring my own mah-jong paper and write the notes and paste it on the board to save time, you know, rather than write it on the board during class time.*

Siti: *Yeah*

*Interview, 24 November 2010*

This point was also confirmed by the students as many students stated that they were involved in learning activities that were based on text books and printed handouts. In Extract 4.5, S12, S10 and S14 stated that their teachers used text books as the main source of teaching materials.

**Extract 4.5**

S12: *The teacher is just teaching according to the text book.*

S10: *other than that, the teacher teach based on textbook.*

S14: *In secondary school, I studied English language through English textbook.*

*Classroom artefact, 8 December 2010*

Apart from text books, teachers usually use a print-based reading and writing approach in their lessons. In Extract 4.6, S10 claimed that his teacher used handouts containing sample questions of the national examination which usually consisted of a few reading passages and several comprehension questions.

**Extract 4.6**

Fariza: *Usually, what kind of materials the teacher bring to the class?*

S10: *Handouts*

Fariza: *What kind of handouts?*

S10: *The teacher bring sample questions of the SPM ( the national examination for high school students).*

Fariza: *So, they give you passages and then you answer questions based on the passages?*

S10: *Yes.*

Fariza: *Everyday?*

S10: *When there is an English class.*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

The use of technological resources during learning seems limited because of a lack of resources and restricted access to technology. The only technological resources that Siti and Arfah had used in their previous lessons were a radio and a PowerPoint presentation as illustrated in Extract 4.7.

**Extract 4.7**

Fariza: *What type of technology that you have ever used in your lessons?*

Arfah: *The radio ((laughs)) in my case; I have to bring my own radio. We listened to songs and fill in the blanks.*

Siti: *In my case, it was a Powerpoint presentation. That's all.*

*Interview, 24 November 2010*

The access to a computer laboratory in their schools was restricted and Siti and Arfah had difficulties in accessing the computer laboratory. In Extract 4.8, Siti mentioned that her schools was not equipped with technological resources and that caused her to use a traditional approach in her teaching. Arfah claimed that it was difficult to gain access to technological resources in her school because they were limited and specifically assigned to computing teachers. I also recorded in my research journal (24 November 2010) “*Both teachers felt that it is difficult to gain access to technology in their teachings. Institutions often have the facilities however it is limited and restricted. They described that the procedures to use the facilities as a ‘hassle’ and ‘almost impossible.’*” Siti mentioned that using technological resources in the classroom was sometimes frustrating because “*It is really difficult to set everything. There were a lot of problems. Sometimes when we plan, we still don’t get to use*” (24 Disember 2010).

**Extract 4.8**

Fariza: *So, what do you think about using technology in your teaching?*

Siti: *((laughs)) I think it is a good idea, but*

Arfah: *But ((laughs))*

Siti: *The problem is the facilities! That's all. If the schools are equipped with the facilities, we can carry out activities using technologies. If*



*not, then you are back to using chalk, talk, mah-jong papers, and all that (laughs).*

Arfah: *Yeah, mah-jong papers (laughs). My school was also the same, it was an old school and they don't have many facilities. They won't let the teachers to use the computer labs unless you are a computer teacher.*

Siti: *Yes! It is really impossible.*

*Interview, 24 November 2010*

### **The teacher's initial concern**

At the first and second professional discussion sessions, Siti and Arfah expressed their interest on the idea of implementing a multiliteracies approach in an ESL classroom (Observation, 15 & 24 November 2010). However, I also noticed that Siti and Arfah were uncomfortable as I explained the role of using technologies in a multiliteracies classroom (Research journal, 15 November 2010). At that point, they were not entirely familiar with the philosophy of participatory action research, so they still viewed me as the authoritative person in this research project and were most probably a bit reluctant to express their opinions (see Chapter 2). They seemed uneasy and sometimes I could see them let out a smirking smile and exchange a cynical smile with each other whenever I mentioned the word technology. In addition, the two teachers laughed at most instances of the mention of the word 'technology' or whenever we discussed the issue of technologies in the classroom. I was starting to think that the laughter indicated something more substantial than just a funny situation (Research journal, 24 November 2010). Finally, at the end of my first interview with the teachers, Arfah expressed her concern regarding the use of technologies in this research project, as illustrated in Extract 4.9.

#### **Extract 4.9**

Arfah: *(laughs) From what I understand, we are going to explore the use of technology in ESL classroom, right? But, we are not sure whether it is going to be applicable in this context.*

Siti: *or reliable((laughs))*

Arfah: *Since, umm, we have to book the computer labs. We are also not*

- given any, umm.*
- Siti: *I think the classes are also not equipped with, umm, LCD projector.*
- Arfah: *Yes, no computers .It is a bit difficult.*
- Siti: *Basically, from what I found out from the senior lecturers here, the only room that have access to technology is just the language lab.*
- Arfah: *Which is just one room. Actually we have three language labs but Lab A and B can't be used, I think Lab C is new and they just put it up last semester. And nobody get to use it yet. So (laughs).*
- Siti: *(laughs).*

*Interview, 24 November 2010*

It seemed that the teachers were concerned about the success of implementing multiliteracies pedagogy in the classroom due to limited technological resources at Bakti Polytechnic. They were unsure whether the research project could be continued due to the limited technological resources. We continued discussing ways of getting access to technological resources such as the computer laboratory. I assured the teachers that the Head of the English Language Department had guaranteed me priority access to their newly set up language laboratory (Professional discussion, 24 November 2010). However, when the semester actually commenced, we were not able to utilize the new language laboratory because the laboratory was equipped with computers but was not connected to the internet. In order to gain access to the internet, we were advised to wait till the next semester to begin the research project. However, the research project had to be conducted in that semester because I had a tight deadline to meet as a doctoral student and also bound by sponsorship requirements.

This situation, where it was difficult for us to gain access to technological resources, confirmed the authenticity of Siti and Arfah's initial concern regarding the use of technology in teaching. After a few meetings with the officer who was responsible for the bookings of the computer laboratories in a different faculty, we managed to

include only one part of our class in one computer laboratory. This was because there were only two computer laboratories and they were shared among several faculties including the English Language Department.

At this point, I thought that the teachers' initial concern was grounded to the reality of what was happening in the actual classroom setting. It appeared that the use of technology in the classroom was hindered by the limited and restricted access to technological resources. These limitations and restrictions usually deterred the teachers from using technology in their teaching. According to Siti and Arfah, it was "easier" to remain using the traditional print-based approach rather than "fighting" for a place in the computer laboratory (Informal conversation, 6 December 2010).

This point was also mentioned in our first interview in Extract 4.10:

**Extract 4.10**

Arfah: *My school was also the same. It was an old school and they don't have many facilities. They won't let the teachers use the computer labs unless you are a computer teacher.*

Siti: *Yes! It is really impossible.*

Arfah: *Yeah. So, every time I go into class, I would bring my own mah-jong paper and write the notes and paste it on the board to save time, you know, rather than write it on the board during class time.*

*Interview, 24 November 2010*

## **ACTION: IMPLEMENTING THE MULTILITERACIES**

### **APPROACH**

#### **Summary of the first multiliteracies module**

This section provides the main aspects of the first multiliteracies module based on the detailed description that has been discussed in Chapter 3.

The main characteristics of the first multiliteracies project are:

- The project was to produce a blog that contains information on two careers. The tasks were carried out in groups of five to six people.
- The blog should consist of:
  - findings from actual interviews of two professional regarding their profession such as academic requirement, job specifications and responsibilities at work.
  - Personalized design and format.
- Students were encouraged to use contemporary blogging sites such as *E-Blogger* and *Google blogspot*.

All the lessons in the second part of the module were related to the first multiliteracies project. The lessons included:

- Appropriate language and communication skills;
- Interview skills;
- critical analysis practices.

## **OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION: INITIAL RESPONSES**

### **TOWARDS THE MULTILITERACIES APPROACH**

#### **Responses towards situated practice and overt instruction learning activities**

It appeared that situated practice and overt instruction activities were well received by the students. The earlier stages of the lessons focused on a scaffolding process that included conceptualising and experiencing knowledge processes (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). In these lesson, students were quite comfortable with the approaches used especially the overt instruction learning activity where we, as teachers, helped

the students to consciously understand the concepts of language use and functions through deductive teaching. For example, we assisted the students to conceptualize ways in forming questions in English including WH-Questions and Yes/No questions. In this learning session, the ambience of the class was exceptionally composed, where all students were very quiet and reserved. Extract 4.11 shows an entry from my research journal regarding this point:

**Extract 4.11**

*All listened to me as if I was a spiritualist, spilling knowledge and wisdom in front of the class. It was difficult to get the students to participate in a classroom discussion. Most were silent and avoided eye contact with Arfah and me by looking down at the floor. When I spoke, all eyes were fixed on me.*

*Research journal, 13 December 2012*

The composed ambience, however, was contrastive to the ambience of the class before the lesson began. Arfah and I usually came in the class ten minutes before the lesson began and we noticed this huge contrast. Our observations suggested that the students were jovial and a bit cheeky before the lesson began. They greeted us with a big smile; they talked to each other happily; they laughed and teased each other. In my research journal (13 December 2010) I noted that “*the ambience of the class before the lesson started was very positive. Students seemed to be in a good mood, and I had a very good feeling; however, when the lesson commenced, the students’ mood seemed to shift from being active to almost passive*”. The students were no longer smiling; everybody forwarded their undivided attention to me and Arfah. They were silent and put on the serious look and listened to us attentively (Observational notes, 13 December, 2010).

Moreover, at the end of the scaffolding process, where I explained the forms and functions of how to form questions in English, I gave the students an exercise

handout containing a few items for the students to practice forming questions in the English language. All students at that time, worked on the practice questions attentively. When asked to share their answers with the whole class by writing their answers on the white board, the students were very cooperative. The selected students almost immediately took the marker pen and wrote their answers on the board, at this moment; it seemed that it did not matter to them whether their answer was correct or wrong. This was evidenced when I noted in my research journal (13 December 2010), “*The students were very cooperative. They listened to me attentively and they gave good feedback*”. In another part, I also stated that “*The class was manageable. All students seemed to concentrate on completing the task on the handouts*” (Research journal, 13 December 2010).

Similarly, students also gave positive responses towards situated practice stage, where we immersed the students in experiences that are related to their life outside the classroom. This was done by using resources that they are used to such as print-based texts and other texts that were available in their lives such as videos and online articles as the learning materials. At the beginning of the lesson where the students were supposed to analyse the trends and features of the current social networking sites on the Internet, I showed the students a *YouTube* video that featured a young girl explaining her views on the functions and features of the Facebook website such as its notifications and status update functions. During this time, the research team noted that all students in the computer laboratory paid full attention to the video, even students who sat at the back of the computer laboratory. Usually, students who sat at the back of the classroom had the tendency not to pay attention of what was happening in the classroom, however, during the utilization of the *YouTube* video, all

of the back benchers appeared to focus their attention to the video (Research journal, 15 December 2012). It seemed that the students were quite excited with the use of multimodal resources such as the *YouTube* video. The ambience of the class was positive as all students were smiling, and actively participated in the learning process (Observation, 15 December 2010).

In addition, according to the students in Extract 4.12, the use of multimodal resources such as the YouTube video in learning was interesting and the video captured their attention and encouraged them to focus on learning.

**Extract 4.12**

Fariza: *When we use the YouTube video? What do you think about using that kind of material in the classroom as opposed to having teachers' handouts and text books?*

S12: *It is interesting.*

Fariza: *Why?*

S12: *Umm, because it attracts our attention, to concentrate.*

S10: *It helps us to focus.*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

In another instance, the students reinforced the point that the use of multimodal resources helped them to focus on the lesson. In Extract 4.13, S10 stated that some of the students were no longer interested with learning using a single media such as print-based materials. Data from the planning stage shows that the students previously were used to learning activities that utilized single media such as print-based materials; therefore it appeared that the students were more interested to explore learning using multimodal resources. According to S10, they were much more focused on learning when the lesson involved a variety of media that combines print, oral and visual aspects.

**Extract 4.13**

- S10: *Lecturers should use a variety of media in learning.*  
 Fariza: *Such as?*  
 S10: *Books, newspapers, videos, online articles.*  
 Fariza: *Why do you need a variety of media?*  
 S10: *So that the students will not get bored by the use of a single media.*  
 Fariza: *Students get bored easily, don't they?*  
 S10: *Yes, as a student I think I can say that (laughs).*  
 Fariza: *Why?*  
 S10: *We got tired looking at one media only.*  
*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

Furthermore, the students regarded the use of multimodal resources such as the video in learning, as ‘*natural*’, describing the multimodal resources as something that were part of their lives outside the classroom as illustrated in Extract 4.14. This was because multimodal resources were not limited to print words on paper, but other components such as oral, visual, audio, gestural and spatial aspects that constituted skills that the students experienced and exposed to most of the times especially outside the classroom. According to the students, these multimodal resources aided their understanding of the topic being discussed as compared to only reading from print-based materials.

**Extract 4.14**

- Fariza: *So, if I bring one print article about Facebook fever or the YouTube video, which one do you prefer?*  
 S10: *The video.*  
 S12: *Umm, video*  
 Fariza: *Why?*  
 S10: *Because it is more natural.*  
 Fariza: *Why do you say that?*  
 S12: *We don't need to read.*  
 Fariza: *What do you mean by natural?*  
 S10: *Umm, because conversations [such as in the videos] like that is familiar in our lives. We do it every day. So, we are more comfortable to listen and then understand rather than reading.*  
 Fariza: *So, you are more comfortable having videos rather than print-based materials in the classroom?*  
 S10: *Yes.*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*



## **Reflection and Solution**

We considered that our initial attempt to use multimodal resources in the classroom was a success as most students responded positively towards the use of the multimodal resources. As asserted by socio-cultural theory, learning is mediated by tools such as language and semiotic resources and since multimodal resources were already present in the students' lives outside the classroom, the students showed interest towards the use of multimodal resources in their lessons. The students described learning using multimodal resources as 'natural' indicating that those resources were already closely intertwined in their social lives outside the classroom. It seemed that the use of multimodal resources in learning encouraged the students to concentrate better on the lessons. One of the students described that they were tired of learning using a single media. We assumed that the students had been using print texts in most of their learning contexts so that the use of multimodal resources seemed refreshing to them. It appeared that the students could focus more on learning due to the use of these resources in the learning sessions.

Even though the students responded positively towards our learning activities where they listened attentively for information from me as their teacher, the research team was quite concerned with the overly quiet atmosphere and students' apparently submissive attitude. For example when I explained to the students the concept of forming questions in English using question words such as *What/ Who/ Where/Why/ How*, the students listened to my explanation attentively. Everyone looked at me, trying to understand the concept of forming questions. Similarly, in an activity where the student were given a print hand out containing practice questions for them to practise forming questions in the English language, all students worked on the

exercise diligently. Everyone answered the questions and when asked to share their answers with the whole class, they willingly shared their answers. Everything seemed to be picture perfect of an ideal classroom in Malaysian context.

Since the research team were analysing data from socio-cultural perspectives, we felt that the students' socio-cultural attributes influenced the students' responses towards our multiliteracies approach. To me, the situation mentioned in the previous paragraph was a common description of classroom learning in the Malaysian setting. Arfah stated that perhaps the students were heavily influenced by learning in a teacher-centred environment, and to the students the *correct* way of learning was to listen attentively to the teachers (Informal conversation, 6 December 2010). I also noted this event in my research journal: "*This scenario must be cultural. Perhaps these students were used to teacher-centred teaching in schools*". Another contributing point of the students' submissive attitude could be the culturally-determined hierarchical relationship between teacher and students in a Malaysian setting. In this hierarchical relationship, students, who were at a lower position in the social hierarchy as compared to teachers, were obligated to show respect to the teachers (Badli Esham & Faizah, 2010; Fung, 2010; Idris & Tengku Sarina Aini, 2007). Usually respect is translated into obedience and listening attentively to what the teacher was saying (see Chapter 2).

We were aware that the students were highly influenced by their socio-cultural background, but to encourage collaborative participation as suggested by participatory action research we decided to find ways to deal with the issue. The team decided that it would be useful if we minimized teacher domination in the

classroom and conducted in-class activities that involved more interaction between teachers and students. Specifically, we planned to foster a closer relationship with the students, where we would have more personalized dialogue with the students in small groups, approximately four people in a group. The main objective of having these personalized dialogues was to maintain good rapport and encourage active participation from the students, consistent with the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. Through this way, it was hoped that we could encourage an environment that prioritized interactions and discussions between teachers and students. At that point, we were hoping that through this practice, we could encourage a shift of the traditional hierarchical relationship between teachers and students and consequently benefit the students' learning in general.

### **Issues in critical thinking and applying knowledge to a new practice**

Even though the students responded well generally to situated practice and overt instruction activities, data showed that the students had a few issues in adapting to critical framing and transformed practice activities especially in terms of practising critical thinking and applying knowledge. 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 in engaging in activities that required them to work individually, such as completing comprehension exercises that we had done in Week 2. In my research journal (13

December 2010), I noted that *“students were cooperative in answering questions in the handouts. They answered all questions and were able to share their answers with the class.”* 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 conducted an activity that required the students to work in groups. 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 of the sites in terms of language, designs and functions. When forming the groups, the students seemed uncomfortable; however, after firm encouragement, the students managed to form groups, which did not consist of four people in a group. Most groups were grouped according to gender, so we had almost all female and all male groups. Only two groups had a mixture of male and females in the group. In order to uphold a sense of freedom of choice to the students, we had allowed such grouping. During the discussion time, some students were doing the work attentively; however, there were also some students 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. Arfah noted this to me in one of our informal conversations. Arfah commented that *“The students are clueless. They sit in their groups and they don’t know what to do. Some students just sit and talk about other things! They are not doing the task that we asked them to do!”* (Informal conversation, 15 December 2010).

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, I 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 4.15:

**Extract 4.15**

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 4.21 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.

### **Reflection and Solution**

Our multiliteracies approach promotes collaborative learning and it seemed that the students considered working in teams as an obstacle. Analysing from socio-cultural perspectives, the team identified that this situation might be caused by the students’ 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 at 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 (see to Chapter 2). 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 decided to put the students in a different social circle, a fusion of male and female students in one group, 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.

### **An issue of oral presentation**

It appeared from our observations that the students were also having issues with oral presentations. Even though the tips and ways to a good presentation had been discussed in one of the lessons prior to the oral presentation, the students did not apply that knowledge in their actual oral presentations. This was evidenced in the presentations of their first multiliteracies project. They were supposed to share their career blog and explain to the class about their choices for designs and themes featured in their blogs. During the presentation, all students were reading word for word from the LCD projector wall screen rather than speaking to the audience. The students looked uncomfortable while presenting and did not maintain eye contact with the audience, except with me, their class teacher. This was also confirmed by the students in a later informal conversation (22 January 2011), where S6 stated that *“umm, during the first presentations, everyone just read from the screen”*. Meanwhile, S1 agreed *“So, we didn’t get what they were saying, because it was not our own words and we just read from the screen”*.

In addition, almost all students spoke with low volume during their presentation that a majority of the audience could not hear the presentations well (Research journal, 22 December 2010). Siti noted that *“I sat at the back just now, and I can’t hear anything! All I saw was their mouth moving and them looking at the screen!”* (Informal conversation, 22 December 2010). As a result of these poor presentations, the audience did not pay attention. Most audience members talked to each other and

some students actually browsed the internet and accessed their *Facebook* pages and emails (Classroom observation, 22 December 2010).

### **Reflection and Solution**

The research team viewed this issue as a minor problem. Due to the students' examination-based learning background, they were mostly exposed to activities that highlighted answering sample examination questions in the classroom and less practice on oral presentations. Since conducting oral presentation is considered as one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that the research team would like to foster using the multiliteracies approach, we decided to have more in-class oral presentation practice in the coming cycle of the research project to enhance the students' oral presentation skills.

### **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 works. This point was reflected in the students' final product of their first multiliteracies project. The research team noticed that most of the work or the career blogs presented on the presentation day 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 4.1 shows a caption from a group of students' career blog and Figure 4.2 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 4.1 and 4.2 show the similarities of the students' career blog's wordings to website. It shows that the students copied the text and then pasted the text on their career blog without any academic references.

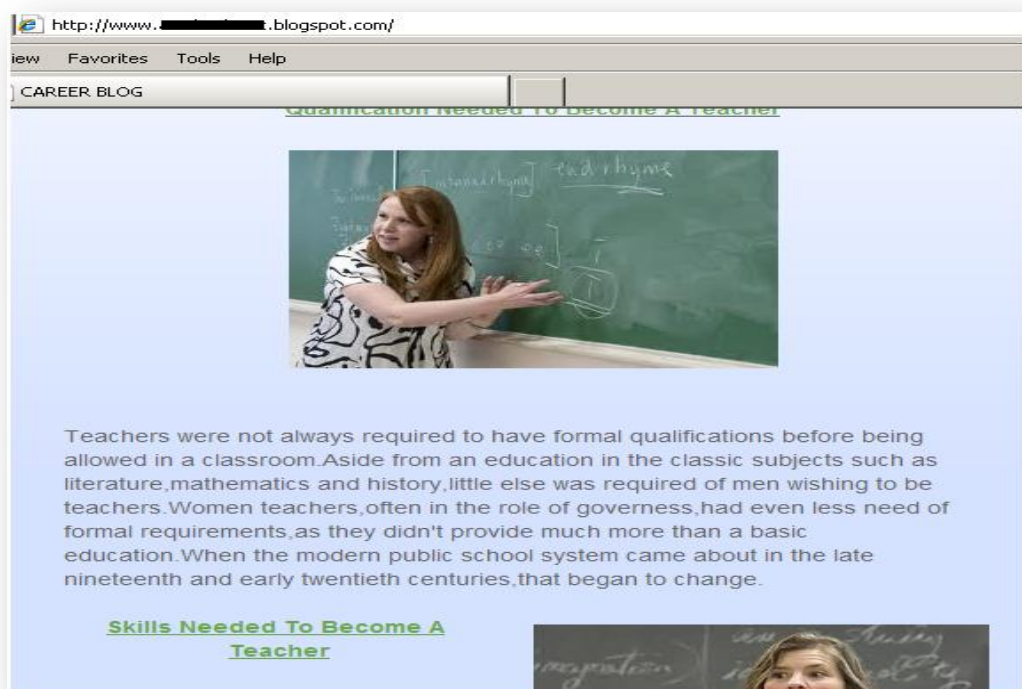


Figure 4.1 An example of a group of students' career blog

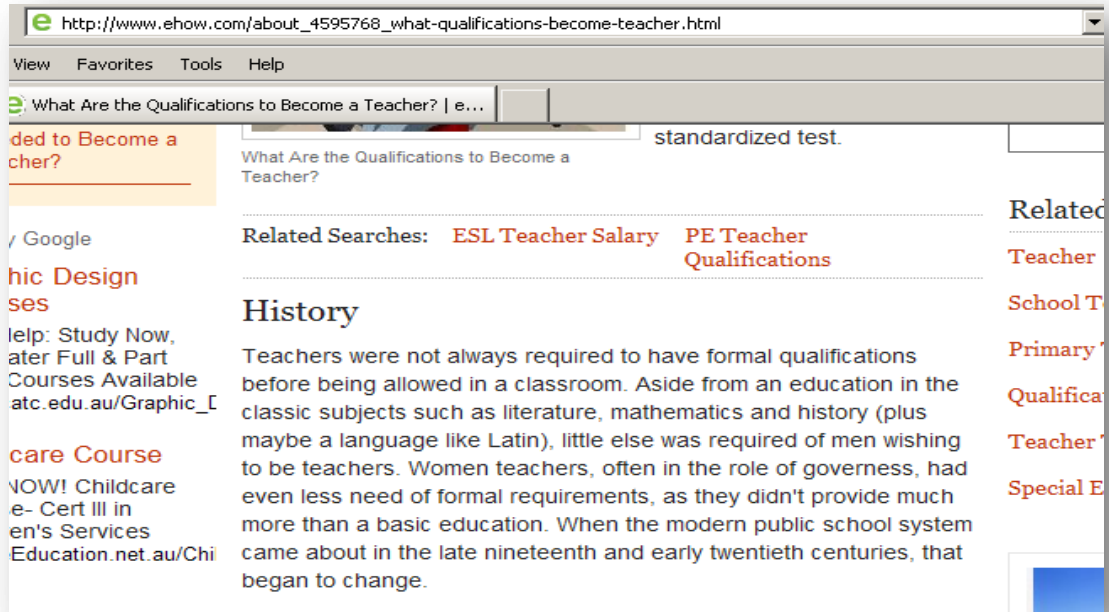


Figure 4.2 The exact wording used in the students' career blog from a ehow.com website

The students also confirmed that they plagiarised from another website when completing their first multiliteracies project. In an informal conversation, as illustrated in Extract 4.16, they stated that;

**Extract 4.16**

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, S11 associated the difficulties of creating a career blog to their action of plagiarising from articles on the Internet.

In addition, at 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.

### **Reflection and solution**

The team concluded that perhaps 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 our research project, the students brought similar learning traditions to our multiliteracies classroom, and as a result the students 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 learning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. 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. 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. It was hoped that through these discussions, students would have diverse perspectives on the issues being discussed and that this would help to promote critical thinking.

### **An issue of handling technology during learning**

From our observations, it seemed that the students were having issues in using or managing the use of technology in the classroom. Since the lessons were carried out in a computer laboratory, the structure of the room was designed for individual learning. The computer laboratory had 40 tables and 40 computers were stationed with wide aisles in between the rows. The layout was suitable for private learning, but it was not appropriate for interactive learning.

In most cases, due to the layout of the space, some students especially those who sat at the back of the computer laboratory were out of the teacher's radar because of the huge distance of their stations and the teacher. Some students took this opportunity to do other work rather than participating in the lesson. For example, in conducting a critical analysis of the current social networking websites on the Internet, some students took the opportunity of using the computer to browse the Internet for personal purposes such as *Facebook* and emails. Only a few students actually used the computer to find information to complete the critical analysis (Classroom observation, 15 December 2010).

The research team's observation regarding the misuse of technology during learning was confirmed by some students in an informal conversation illustrated in Extract 4.17. S11 expressed that he thought that learning using technological resources was useful; however, he felt that at this point the use of technology would not benefit their learning due to the misuse of these resources by certain individuals in the classroom. S10 and S11 viewed that more enforcement or control on the teachers' part would be helpful in making sure that the use of technological resources could be used solely for learning purposes.

**Extract 4.17**

Fariza: *Okay, if given the chance, do you want to use more technology in the classroom? Or do you think it is not necessary?*

S10: *I want to use more,*

S11: *Actually, in theory it is useful to use computers in learning. But practically, I think it is hard to handle a group of class in a computer laboratory. Maybe some people, who sat at the back surf other websites that are not relevant such as Facebook. So, I think it is not useful using technology in the classroom.*

Fariza: *So, you think we should have more management in the classroom in terms of monitoring what the students are doing with the computers?*

S11: *I think so, safety precaution (laughs).*

S10: *Yes. Maybe we put camera at the back ((laughs)).*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

## **Reflection and Solution**

It seemed that the students had issues in handling the use of technology in their classroom (Professional discussion, 24 December 2010). This may be due to the fact that technology was so rarely used in their learning that, the students did not know how to manage technology such as computers and the Internet sensibly in a lesson. To counter this problem, the team decided to have more activities using the computer and Internet. This was to ensure that the students would have additional contact with the technological resources and would be able to familiarise themselves with the use of computers and the Internet during lessons. It was hoped that frequent use of the technological resources would familiarise the students with the multiliteracies approach learning environment. Once the students were familiar with the use of these resources, it was hoped that the students would learn to manage the usage of the computers and internet towards learning rather than for irrelevant and personal purposes.

## **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 4.18 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 4.18**

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 their views on matters related to their learning with their teachers. 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 questions from us. 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 4.19 illustrated this point:

**Extract 4.19**

- 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 4.20 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 with me, at that time their classroom teacher. The students remained silent when I tried to initiate discussion on the topic of using videos as opposed to using print-based materials in classroom learning. S8 said “yes” and did not elaborate his answer and the rest of the group nodded their heads to show agreement with S8’s statement. As a result, the data for this cycle was quite short and not very descriptive. This has been evidenced throughout this chapter of my dissertation.

**Extract 4.20**

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 4.21 shows that S5 stated that she preferred the teacher to make all the decisions in terms of their teaching and learning rather than the students themselves giving opinions on that 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 (Extract 4.18 to Extract 4.21) 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 4.21**

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*

**Reflection and Solution**

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 the 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. 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; Fung, 2010; Novera, 2004). 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 (see Chapter 2). 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 active participation from students in our lessons step by step. 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. It was hoped that through these efforts, the students would be more willing to share ideas and opinions especially about their teaching and learning processes.

### **REFLECTING ON OUR FIRST ATTEMPT IN IMPLEMENTING A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH IN AN EXAMINATION- BASED CONTEXT: FAILURE VERSUS TRIAL RUN**

Initially, looking at the data from the first attempt of implementing multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning context, the research team saw this cycle as a failure (Professional discussion, 24 December 2010). We initially had the idea that the findings were opposing the basic concepts of multiliteracies approach in almost every way. The knowledge processes such as conceptualising; experiencing, analysing and applying (Cope and Kalantzis, 2004) and the knowledge and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills emphasized by the multiliteracies approach (The New London Group, 1996, 2000) that we hoped to be present in the students' classroom artefacts were mostly underdeveloped. It seemed that we had failed to coordinate a multiliteracies classroom that applied all the concepts and foundations that underlie multiliteracies pedagogy and a socio-cultural theory on learning. At one point of time, all of the research team members, deep in our hearts, considered that this research project was moving towards disaster as evidenced in Extract 4.22:

#### **Extract 4.22**

Fariza: *To tell you the truth, after the first cycle I was so worried about the outcome. I was ready to call my supervisor and tell her that I am not*

*getting anything from the research project; I was ready to send a SOS signal (laughs).*

Siti: *(laughs) I was worried too; looking at the students' cold response was very scary.*

Fariza: *Yeah (laugh)).*

*Informal conversation, 5 January 2011*

Due to this “*failure*”, the research team was determined to fix the problems as participatory action research recommends that practical solutions be taken after reflecting on and analysing one’s own social practice. In conjunction with the conceptual framework of the study, we analysed each issue that had emerged from the socio-cultural perspective, to identify the underlying cause of the students’ responses and the ways the students negotiated learning using the multiliteracies approach. We looked at the issues and we provided practical solutions that would suit our background and practices (Professional discussion, 24 December 2011). During this process, we discovered that our first attempt of implementing the multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning context was not a disappointment. This was evidenced in an interview with Arfah at the end of the first cycle as illustrated in Extract 4.23.

#### **Extract 4.23**

Fariza: *Do you think that our first cycle is a success in achieving our goals?*

Arfah: *I think Cycle 1 was more of an experiment for the students and teachers. We expected them [the students] to be able to carry out the assignment, but we forgot that the students did not come from, the students are first year students and they were from schools. So, instead of having the objectives achieved, it was more of a, not to say it was a failure, but we overlooked some things, some criteria.*

Fariza: *What do you mean by the criteria? Do you mean that the students were from schools and they have a different learning culture?*

Arfah: *Yes. They were usually guided. When they enter a university, they are not sure of the learning culture here.*

Fariza: *So, it was an experiment for us as well, right?*

Arfah: *Yeah, we expected something different, but it turned out differently.*

*Interview, 5 January 2011*

Extract 4.23 also shows that the research team were looking at this research project from a different perspective at the beginning, where we saw the examination-based learning context as an obstacle to the implementation of multiliteracies approach. We initially did not consider the students' cultural learning and practices as an essential element in the students' lives and at the same time influenced the direction and outcome of our research project. Siti called the first cycle a 'trial run' for multiliteracies approach to be implemented. Arfah regarded it as an experimental stage. Soon after, we realized that our first attempt was actually an orientation stage for both teachers and students.

It was a definitely a phase of adjustment for students. The students stated that they were getting to know their classmates. This research project was conducted in the first week of the students' first semester in Bakti Polytechnic. According to the students, they did not know their classmates well enough for them to work collaboratively for the success of their first multiliteracies project as illustrated in Extract 4.24.

**Extract 4.24**

Fariza: *What is the difference of your experience in Cycle 1 as compared to Cycle 2? Do you see any differences in terms of your experiences?*

S11: *That's it. The first assignment was not a documentary. It was difficult because we did a lot of copy and paste [plagiarising from the internet]. In our second assignment, we had a lot of teamwork. So,*

S10: *Maybe we need to improve; we can't be at the same place all the time. It gets better with time.*

S12: *Yeah, for the first assignment, we were new to this polytechnic. We were not close to each other yet.*

Fariza: *Was it an adjustment period for you?*

S12: *This is already our seventh, eighth weeks together, so it is easier to communicate.*

S11: *It is the documentary (multiliteracies project) that made us closer together; we had a lot of interaction.*

*Interview, 5 January 2011*

Extract 4.25 shows that the students mentioned that they had come from a different learning environment and needed time to adjust to the new approach of learning (Informal conversation, 19 January 2011). According to the S6, they were accustomed to learning in a teacher-centred learning system as well as an examination-based environment which were contrary to what they were experiencing through the multiliteracies approach. She asserted that they now had to learn through a whole new learning approach and environment, which was an approach that incorporated multiliteracies. Due to this point, the students agreed that they needed time to adjust to the learning approach that was fairly “new” to them.

**Extract 4.25**

Fariza: *Okay, let us discuss the differences of cycle one and cycle two. I could see there was change of attitude. When you were doing your career blog, you were less motivated.*

S2: *I think we were still shy.*

S6: *Because we didn't know each other yet.*

S1: *Yup. We didn't know our classmates too.*

S6: *And then we were still adjusting to the new learning approach. We used to learn using text books, but here we learn through different ways, different environment.*

S1: *Something new to us.*

S6: *Yup, definitely something new.*

*Interview, 19 January 2011*

The above point was also affirmed by other students as illustrated in Extract 4.26. S8 and S9 mentioned that they were stunned by the differences of the learning culture between the multiliteracies classroom and their examination-based learning background. According to them, this factor contributed to the poor performance of their first multiliteracies project. They had difficulties in understanding learning through the multiliteracies approach and needed time to adjust to the new learning approach.

**Extract 4.26**

S8: *I felt like completing the task with all my might, you know, give a*

*100% percent.*

S7: *I wanted to do the best*

S9: *We were quite confused at the first cycle.*

Arfah: *Why?*

S9: *It was like a cultural shock to us because we had just finished school.*

S8: *Yeah, just finished school and then suddenly we had to do our own blogs (laughs).*

S9: *We had a different experience (in Cycle 2) because we are already used to this approach of learning, so we could complete the assignment (multiliteracies project 2)*

*Interview, 5 January 2011*

It was also something new for the research team, as this was the first time we had used the multiliteracies approach to teach. We were tied to the ideas and concepts of multiliteracies learning in Western literatures and had decided that our own multiliteracies classroom should have a similar outcome. In reality, our first attempt was a platform for us to understand our own practices better in order for us to suggest solutions that best suited our community (Research journal, 19 August 2011) as suggested by participatory action research. Using the socio-cultural perspective, we finally understood that the students' examination-based learning background and practices were not a huge obstacle to the implementation of the multiliteracies approach. In fact, understanding the students' distinctive socio-cultural background helped us to create a contextualized multiliteracies approach that would best fit the Malaysian learning context. Our first attempt of implementing a multiliteracies approach was not a failure but a trial run for a multiliteracies approach to be implemented in a different setting with different cultural practices. Extract 4.27 shows an entry in my research journal (24 August 2011) where I noted that;

**Extract 4.27**

*In this research project, the implementation of multiliteracies approach took a different meaning. Our multiliteracies approach now was not only about providing a new learning environment or creating a new learning approach, but also about learning about what the society treasured most.*

*Research Journal, 24 August 2011*

## **SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter has explained the action research processes that were undertaken by the research team which includes planning, action, observation and reflection on our first attempt of implementing multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning context. This chapter began with explaining the teachers' previous pedagogical practice as well as the students' previous language learning background. It then elaborated on the observation and reflection of data from the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project. The first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project was first viewed as a failure, but subscribing to the socio-cultural perspective, the research team discovered new ways of implementing the multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian context.

The next chapter will discuss the data and findings of the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project where the research team implemented the amendments discussed in Chapter 4.



## **CHAPTER 5**

# **THE SECOND ATTEMPT OF IMPLEMENTING MULTILITERACIES APPROACH IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT: FUSING A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH WITH MALAYSIAN CULTURES**

### **PREVIEW**

Chapter 4 explained the data and findings from the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project which focused on the socio-cultural issues that influenced the ways the students' initially negotiated learning through the multiliteracies approach. Chapter 4 also suggested practical solutions to address the issues raised in that chapter.

Chapter 5 will discuss data and findings from the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project. The data and findings will be discussed based on the action research process of planning, action, observation and reflection. The chapter will end with the research team's reflective analysis on the overall issues of the implementation of the multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning context.

## **PLANNING: REFLECTING THE ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST CYCLE OF MULTILITERACIES RESEARCH PROJECT**

At the beginning of the planning stage of the second cycle, the research team reflected on the reflective analysis from the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project in a professional discussion session. In the two-hour discussion, we raised several relevant issues that were significant in our first attempt of implementing the multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning context. We saw three areas that needed to be considered in the planning of the second part of the module where it was essential to address the cultural issues surrounding teachers' and students' relationship in the classroom.

Firstly, based on the reflective analysis of the first cycle, the research team was aware of the cultural relationship between teacher and students during the learning process in the classroom, where teachers are often seen as the experts and the main provider of knowledge and information, while students are often considered as recipients of knowledge. The popular belief held in the Asian was that students were empty vessels to be filled (Chia, 2009; Gan, 2009; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Kennedy, 2002; Wong, 2004). In contrast, the research team believed that the students had their own existing knowledge and our role was to boost their knowledge by providing new knowledge and helping students transform their current practices by combining their existing knowledge with the knowledge gained in the classroom. This point was also highlighted in the discussion of the notion of the zone of proximal development in socio-cultural theory, and situated practice and overt instruction of multiliteracies pedagogy. In order to do that, the research team decided

to use the students' cultural practices in learning to the advantage of the research project.

Since the students were accustomed to the idea that teachers provide all information required for the learning session, the research team thought that the teachers should play a more active role in providing information and guiding the students in learning activities. The research team decided to provide detailed description and step-by-step guides for all classroom tasks, activities and the second multiliteracies project. The detailed descriptions were provided in writing so that all students would have access at all times to the necessary information. In addition, we scheduled regular meetings with every group to monitor their progress and provide feedback and support in terms of completing the second multiliteracies project.

Secondly, the reflective analysis of the first cycle showed that the students were influenced by the status difference between teachers and students which is common in a Malaysian learning context. Often, there is a gap in the relationship between teachers and students due to different status in the hierarchical structure. Teachers are at the top of the hierarchical structure and therefore viewed as superior. Meanwhile, students who are at the bottom of the structure are viewed as having inferior status, therefore they need to listen and obey the teachers as a sign of respect (Badli Esham & Faizah, 2010; Fung, 2010; Novera, 2004). Due to this gap in status, in most cases teachers and students have minimal dialogues during the learning process. To address this issue, we decided to minimize the status difference in the teacher-student relationship through having more informal and casual dialogues with the students. It would be quite unfeasible for us to have casual learning

environments such as in the Western learning setting where the students could address the teachers using their first name because the practice contradicts Malaysian cultural practice. Thus, it was sufficient for us to begin with a small step by trying to maintain good rapport with the students through casual teacher-student conversations between our lessons. This effort was to minimize the gap between student and teacher and encourage a more positive environment to cultivate a sense of agency between teachers and students.

Thirdly, it seemed that the students' cultural practices in the classroom were influencing the way they negotiated learning activities that required critical thinking. In the previous cycle of the Multiliteracies Project, the students had issues with producing authentic works. Most students preferred to continue with a 'copy-paste' culture, where they took information directly from online articles and put it in their documents without any academic reference to the original work. The copy-paste culture is a form of plagiarism and the research team were determined to change that culture in the second cycle. In the second cycle, we aimed to emphasize activities that required the students to be engaged in higher order thinking skills such as analysing, synthesizing and applying their knowledge to produce something new or create a new practice in alignment with the principles of multiliteracies pedagogy. We intended to do this by controlling the students' group work dynamics as well as by conducting more activities that required critical analysis by students. This effort was also related to the second issue discussed earlier, which was creating opportunities for teacher-student interaction. It was hoped that by having more teacher-student interactions, the students would be more inclined to express and share their opinions and later develop critical thinking.

In short, the multiliteracies approach in the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project was going to include the following amendments:

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 teachers and students;
3. The encouragement of critical thinking among students through engagement with critical thinking activities and the development of a sense of agency among the students.

## **ACTION: THE SECOND MULTILITERACIES MODULE**

### **Summary of the second multiliteracies module**

This section provides the main aspects of the second multiliteracies module based on the detailed description that has been discussed in Chapter 3.

The main aspects of the second multiliteracies project were:

- The project was to produce a 15-minute documentary (news-like documentary equivalent to Malaysia's *Majalah 3* and Australia's Win TV's *A Current Affair*) based on the findings of a mini research on issues in their community.
- The tasks were carried out in groups of four to five people.
- The documentaries consisted of:

- a brief explanation of the issue as a whole through reading online articles related to the issue
- insights on the from community members obtained through survey questionnaires and interviews.
- Students were encouraged to use their mobile phones, digital cameras or video cameras to record the documentaries.

All the lessons in the second part of the module were related to the second multiliteracies project. The lessons included:

- critical analysis practices;
- skills to synthesize and evaluate information from a variety of multimodal resources;
- research skills;
- technological consultation.

## **OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION: ISSUES ADDRESSED**

### **Learning beyond the traditional print-based resources: A time for multimodality**

From informal conversations with the students, it appeared that the students were tired of learning using traditional print-based resources in learning. Data showed that they preferred to have multimodality as well as the use of technological resources in their learning. In one informal conversation, when I enquired whether the students enjoyed learning using technological resources, the students responded almost instantaneously before I could complete my question. This was shown in Extract 5.1:

**Extract 5.1**

- Fariza: *Okay. Do you like using technology in learning? For example,*  
 S2: *Yes.*  
 S6: *Yes!*  
 Fariza: *such as using movie maker , the internet, online articles, movie clips*  
 S6: *Yes*  
 S2: *Yes*  
 Fariza: *Did you use your hand phone for recording?*  
 S1: *I used my friend's hand phone.*  
 S6: *Yeah, handphone.*  
 Fariza: *Why do you like to use technology in your learning?*  
 S1: *It is fun.*  
 S6: *It makes learning interesting.*  
 S1: *Yes, it makes it [learning] different from the rest.*  
 S6: *It was fun because we don't have to read books all the time.*  
 S1: *Something other than books. Books are boring*  
 S6: *It was like we had something important to do.*  
 S1: *Other than reading books.*  
 Fariza: *You keep on repeating that you need something else other than books. Why?*  
 S6: *Not that we don't like books, we would love to read books too, but,*  
 S1: *Umm*  
 Fariza: *Reading books bore you or reading books is too customary?*  
 S1: *We are so used to reading books, Technology is different.*  
 Fariza: *How is it different?*  
 S6: *Books are just words on paper, but using technology we get to have sounds and pictures. It is interesting.*  
 S1: *Yes*  
 S6: *Books are just words; we have to visualize it in our minds.*  
 Fariza: *So you are interested with pictures, sounds, videos?*  
 S2: *pictures,*  
 All students: *Yes! (laugh)*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In Extract 5.1, S1 claimed that learning using technology was different from the rest of her learning experience. She preferred learning using technology because it was something other than reading typed words on a page. This shows that the students were weary of learning through print based resources such as books and printed handouts. Another instance of the students' weariness towards the use of monomodal print-based resources was evidenced by another informal conversation (22 January

2011) where S8 mentioned that as students, they had been learning through reading books for almost 12 years, starting from the primary education level and continuing to the secondary level. He insisted that it was now time for them to move to something new which was multimodality and the use of technological resources.

The students also explained the reasons why they needed the shift from using traditional print-based resources to multimodal resources. In Extract 5.1, S1 mentioned that the use of technology in learning was different because of its multimodal representations such as sounds (audio) and pictures (visual). This statement was supported by S6, who viewed the use of technological resources in learning as lending significance to the whole learning experience rather than reading words from books and perhaps answering examination questions. Even though S2 was a bit quiet throughout the conversation; nearing the end she expressed her agreement with the point that the use of technological resources in learning offered a whole new genre in learning resources other than the printed words on paper. Through the multiliteracies approach, the students experienced learning through multimodal resources that included printed words on paper, pictures, sounds, and videos.

Extract 5.2 shows the conversation between Siti, Arfah and a group of male students about the use of technological resources in learning. The students suggested that the use of technological resources in learning was more fun and interesting compared to the use of traditional print-based resources. S7 stated that that the use of technological resources was different from the traditional resources that are usually used in Malaysian learning contexts, therefore making learning more interesting. S8



and S9 stressed the point that using technological resources in learning was easy without elaborating more about the point. However, when asked whether they would prefer the use of traditional print-based resources or technological resources in learning, the students firmly opted for technology-based learning. It seemed that they preferred using technological resources because the resources were contemporary and perhaps more related to their lives outside the classroom. S7 pointed out that the use of technological resources in learning was more modern. S8 insisted that learning activities that used technological resources were fun as no other subjects at the polytechnic had utilised technology in such a way as in our multiliteracies classroom; and he was confident that the use of latest technological gadgets cultivated interest among students to learn.

### **Extract 5.2**

- Siti: *Okay, next one, what do you think about using technology such as computer*
- S9: *Of course yes!*
- S7: *Yes*
- Siti: *Yes? Okay, a big yes. Why?*
- S7: *Not traditional*
- Arfah: *Why?*
- S7: *More interesting.*
- S8: *Easy to use*
- S9: *Yeah, it is easy to make , easy to use*
- Siti: *Why easy?*
- S9: *Easy, so easy*
- Siti: *What do you mean by easy?*
- S9: *easy, just like,*
- Siti: *Was it easy because you already knew how to use the gadgets such as camera?*
- S9: *Yeah*
- Siti: *If you were given a chance to choose between traditional learning and technology-based learning, which one would you choose?*
- S7: *Technology*
- Siti: *Why? Was it because it was easy?*
- S7: *Yes*
- Siti: *Apart from that?*
- S7: *[It is] more modern*
- Siti: *Okay. What do you think about using computers and the Internet in*

- learning English? Do you think it is fun or boring?*
- S9: *[It is] fun.*
- Arfah: *Why? Was it because of Facebook?*  
*(All students laugh)*
- S9: *Facebook? Not really.*
- Siti: *Okay, so why do you think it is good to learn using computers and the Internet?*
- S8: *Because, one because it is fun. In other subjects, we do not use computers, right. So, this [learning using technology] will cultivate interests among the students to learn the English language using the latest technology.*
- S7: *It was easy to find information.*
- Siti: *Easy to find information? Just googled for them, right?*
- S7: *Yeah.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

Learning using technological resources was associated with a pleasant learning experience as mentioned by a group of female students talking to Siti and Arfah in an earlier informal conversation (see Extract 5.3). The students confirmed that they enjoyed learning using technological resources. Even though the students did not elaborate on their answers, they were certain that the use of technological resources provided a pleasurable learning experience as compared to their previous learning experiences in examination-based learning contexts, where print-based resources were always utilized. S5 stated that throughout her learning experience, the only technology that she used was the computer and the Internet. S3 agreed to the statement stating that the experience of using technological resources through the multiliteracies approach was different from her previous learning experiences, where computers and the Internet were used solely to search for information.

### **Extract 5.3**

- Siti: *Next, do you like using the latest technology such as computers, internet and mobile phones in learning English?*
- S4: *Yes, yes.*
- S5: *Of course.*
- Siti: *Why?*  
*(All students laugh)*

- S4: *More fun! [as compared to the traditional learning print based resources].*
- S3: *Yeah.*
- Arfah: *Do you have any other subjects that use technology in learning?*
- S5: *Just the internet.*
- Siti: *To search for information?*
- S3: *Yes. Not like this one [multiliteracies approach].*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

The conversation excerpt in Extract 5.4 shows that the students once again mentioned that they preferred the use of multimodal resources such as videos and online articles as the learning resources as compared to using traditional print-based materials such as text books and handouts. S2 stated that she preferred the use of videos rather than books because it was easier to understand videos due to their multimodal properties such as pictures and sounds. It seemed that the students understood information relayed through multimodal resources better, as confirmed by S6. Moreover, the students stated that the combination of the traditional print-based resources and multimodal resources provided them with better learning contexts. According to them, the use of a single media, such as videos, is not suitable in learning thus they recommended the combination of all media to make learning more interesting.

#### **Extract 5.4**

- Fariza: *Okay, do you still remember that we used online articles and movie clips in our*
- S1: *Umm*
- Fariza: *lessons? Do you like those kind text types?*
- S2: *I prefer lessons using movies.*
- Fariza: *Why?*
- S2: *Because we could understand more*
- Fariza: *Why is it easier to understand lessons that used movies?*
- S1: *We could understand the storyline better, as compared to reading it in books*
- S6: *Yeah.*
- S2: *You don't have pictures and sounds in books.*
- S6: *If we watch movies, we could understand the storyline from the beginning*
- Fariza: *So you think that if you have visuals you would understand better?*

- S1: *Yes, we have sounds, movement*  
 S6: *sounds, movement*  
 Fariza: *How about reading print texts such as books?*  
 S1: *A bit more difficult because we have to visualize on our own.*  
 S2: *We have to make our imagination runs wild*  
 S6: *Not to say that books doesn't help our learning process, but they are not as effective as movies.*  
 Fariza: *You feel it is easier to understand lessons using movies?*  
 S1: *Easier to understand*  
*All students: Yeah (students laugh)*  
 Fariza: *Okay, if we use the combination of print text and digital text, visual texts such as movies, and online articles, do you think it is more effective to help learning?*  
 S2: *Yes, [it is] more effective.*  
 S1 & S2: *Yes.*  
 Fariza: *If we use just movies?*  
 S6: *A bit boring then (laughs). If we watch movies every day, it would be boring!*  
 S2: *If we watch movies every day, we would pass out (due to boredom) (laughs)*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

Data from the current study showed that the students were really drawn to learning using technological resources due to their multimodal characteristics. The multimodality was described as being the focal point in assisting the students in the learning process. The students, on different occasions mentioned that they had enough of learning using traditional print-based resources such as books and handouts. They described the experience of using technological resources in learning as fun and enjoyable. They kept on repeating that the move from traditional print-based resources to multimodal technological resources was something different and made learning more significant. These findings display the reasons for an urgent need to replace the practice of using print-based resources with the combination of print-based and multimodal resources. Not only the students seemed to be connected to multimodal resources due to its connection to their lives outside the classroom,

but the use of these resources seemed to draw the students to participate in learning activities more actively.

### **Learning with a sense of adventure: New, challenging yet fun!**

In talking to the students about their learning through multiliteracies approach experiences, most students were shocked and surprised by the nature of the multiliteracies approach. They explained that the approach provided a whole new learning experience for them. This was evidenced by an informal conversation between Arfah, Siti and a group of male students in Extract 5.5:

#### **Extract 5.5**

- Siti: *What was your first reaction when you read the description of the second assignment?*
- S8: *At first, when I got the second assignment, I was shocked because I have never gotten this type of assignment, a documentary type. I think this was a new experience for me as well as my friends.*
- S9: *Same here.*
- Siti: *Anyone had a different view?*
- S9: *Different view?*
- Siti: *Apart from feeling shocked and first time getting this type of assignment?*
- S7: *A new experience.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

This point was also confirmed by another group of students in an informal conversation with me as illustrated in Extract 5.6. Here the students repeatedly mentioned that their first reaction towards the second multiliteracies project was shock and surprise. S1 and S6 further stated that they had never done that kind of assignment before in their previous learning. They then compared their learning experiences in the examination-based learning contexts, where they were accustomed to writing exercises and role play conversations in the classroom. They noted that they also were accustomed to sharing their discussion ideas through writing the points on a piece of mah-jong paper and presenting them to the class. It

was obvious that presenting ideas through a documentary was something completely new to the students. The transcription in Extract 5.5 and Extract 5.6 might not show the excitement of the students in describing their feelings towards learning through the multiliteracies approach, but, by listening and being in that conversation, I noticed that the students were excited by the notion of the second multiliteracies project. They smiled, laughed and spoke with excited tone of voice, showing their enthusiasm towards learning through the multiliteracies approach (Research journal, 22 January 2011). S6, at the end of Extract 5.6, noted that she was surprised when reading the description of the second multiliteracies approach; however, discovered that the project was fun to do. Meanwhile, S1 expressed her excitement by saying she could not wait to do the project right after reading the description of the second multiliteracies project.

#### **Extract 5.6**

- Fariza: *When you read the description of your second assignment for the first time, how do you feel at that time?*
- S6: *Shocked*
- S1: *Shocked (laughs)*
- Fariza: *Why?*
- S1: *Because we haven't done it before, we have never done that kind of assignment.*
- S6: *Never done it before. Before this, in school, we did a lot of homeworks.*
- S1: *Never done it before, I have never done my own video. Never!*
- Fraiza: *Ooo, you have never done this kind of assignment?*
- S6: *This was our first time (laughs)*
- Fariza: *Your first time? What kind of work that you usually do in schools?*
- S1: *In school, we used to do a lot of writing*
- S6: *We used to have discussions, just normal conversations.*
- Fariza: *And then, what did you do after the discussions?*
- S1: *We had to write papers.*
- S2: *Yup, we used books and mah-jong papers ( to write their discussion findings)*
- S6: *Yes, we wrote [our answers] on the mah-jong papers and then we presented [to the class]. That was a normal scenario, but when we do this [the multiliteracies project], it is a new thing for us.*
- Fariza: *It was a new experience to you and that is why you were shocked?*
- S2, S6, S1: *Yes.*

- S2: *A bit shocked*  
 S6: *Yes, shocked. But, it was kinda fun.*  
 S1: *I couldn't wait to do it.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In another informal conversation with a different group of students, the students expressed that they too felt surprised after reading the description of the second multiliteracies project. In Extract 5.7, S11 described that he felt strange because the nature of the multiliteracies project was something he was not used to. S12 made a joke about his own experience being a co-host together with a taller girl, perhaps showing his positive experience in completing the project. Meanwhile S10 directly informed me that he was shocked because the project was something new to him and he had no basic experience in completing such a project or producing a documentary.

**Extract 5.7**

- Fariza: *What was your first reaction when you read about the description of the second assignment?*  
 S11: *Ooo*  
 S12: *Assignment 2? Shocked!*  
 S11: *Felt really strange.*  
 Fariza: *Why did you feel strange?*  
 S11: *We have never done that kind of assignment, so when we get it, we felt it was strange.*  
 S12: *felt like we were becoming artistes, could do a bit of acting (students laugh)*  
 Fariza: *S12, why did you feel shocked?*  
 S12: *because we had to act and had to stand next to a tall person as co host (laughs)*  
 Fariza: *(laughs) S10?*  
 S10: *I was shocked as well, but I like to take it easy for a while and think it over later*  
 Fariza: *Why were you surprised?*  
 S10: *Because we had to do our own documentary, [we have] no experience at all. No basic experience.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

Data show that the students really valued the sense of adventure in learning, and this sense of adventure had become a motivator for the students to work harder to solve problems and complete the multiliteracies project. In an examination-based learning

context, where passing the examination is generally the primary goal, teachers sometimes take little notice of the significance of incorporating a sense of adventure into learning experiences. In these learning contexts, learning is always seen as something formal, and sometimes it is disassociated from the students' lives outside the classroom; often a sense of adventure is not one of the considerations in producing an effective lesson (Professional discussion, 2 February 2011).

Meanwhile, in the current research project, in many instances, the students described that learning through the multiliteracies approach provided a sense of adventure and challenge. Extract 5.8 is an excerpt of an informal conversation between a group of female students and myself, where the students described the challenges they faced in completing the second multiliteracies project. They described their difficulties in completing the second multiliteracies project, such as issues of time, technical aspects, team participation, other people's perception as well as self confidence. However, there was a pleasant twist, surprisingly after all the complaints; the students summarized their experiences in completing the second multiliteracies project as fun and enjoyable. Plus, they had the opinion that completing the project was quite challenging, but the challenges they faced were actually the motivating factors for them to continue completing their documentary. They described their learning experiences through the multiliteracies approach as an exploration or 'adventure'.

**Extract 5.8**

- S6: *We had time constraints.*  
S1: *Yup, we didn't have time; we had problems with the system [technical aspects].*  
S6: *We had a few disagreements with the members of the group.*  
S1: *We had to race time, we did the task in our English class, and then we had math class.*  
Fariza: *So, you have time constraints?*



- S1: *Then, we had to do the recording at the students' shop, I felt shy to do it.*
- S6: *Yes, a bit shy to do it (laughs)*
- Fariza: *You felt shy?*
- S6: *Yes, a bit*
- S1: *I felt so shy! People were looking at me and I could imagine they are saying 'what nonsense is this kid doing' (laughs)*
- S6: *People were looking at us,*
- Fariza: *So, when people were looking at you doing the video, you felt embarrassed? So why do you like the experience?*
- S6: *Not that we don't like it, even though we felt shy, but we enjoyed doing it.*
- S1: *Yeah (laughs)*
- S6: *That was a challenge.*
- Fariza: *Did the challenge made you feel motivated?*
- S1 & S6: *Yes.*
- S6: *I like the challenge, the adventures*
- Fariza: *So, learning was actually an adventure?*
- S2: *Yes!*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In another informal conversation with a group of male students illustrated in Extract 5.9, the experience of completing the second multiliteracies project was described as a risk that they were willing to take. Similarly, these male students described the hardships they had to go through in producing their mini research projects and documentaries. S12 and S11 reiterated their effort in producing the recording for the documentary; they mentioned that they had to do the recordings several times due to external factors in their surroundings. However, they felt it was challenging and that it encouraged them to continue to complete the tasks.

#### **Extract 5.9**

- Fariza: *Do you like your experiences in completing the assignment?*
- S12: *I like it*
- Fariza: *Why?*
- S12: *Because [in order to complete the documentary] we had to do the recording not just one time but [we had to do], take 1, take 2, take 3. A lot of times before it were successful.*
- S11: *A lot of times,*
- Fariza: *Really? I though it just took you one time to complete the recording.*

- S12: *Because we laughed a lot*  
 S11: *Sometimes, when we were doing the recording, we could not see his eyes,*  
 S12: *And, then, it was a bit noisy because [we did the recording] at the cafeteria. The volume of the television was also loud. Sometimes when we were reading the script,*  
 S11: *people passed by,*  
 S12: *Sometimes the scripts were delayed and we were already talking,*  
 Fariza: *How did you write the scripts?*  
 S12: *Huge.*  
 S11: *on an A3 size paper.*  
 S12: *on A3 paper.*  
 Fariza: *Oo, that's the trick. You looked so professional!*  
*(All students laugh)*  
 S11: *Not really .We had issues with our eye contact.*  
 S10: *Yes, our eyes seemed like we were reading.*  
 Fariza: *So, S10, was it a positive or negative experience for you?*  
 S10: *Positive ,umm, we were doing something that we have not done before, meaning we were doing something new,*  
 Fariza: *Umm, so you were trying something new? Why do you like to try something new?*  
 S10: *Umm, meaning we were taking risks to see whether the thing works or not.*  
 Fariza: *Are you saying it was a challenge? Do you like challenges?*  
 S10: *Yes, I love challenges.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In Extract 5.10, S11 and S12 described that at certain points during the process of producing the video, they were feeling tense due to the pressure of dealing with something new, such as using the application of Windows Movie Maker; however, they also described that even though they felt pressured, they considered the process of producing the videos as a *fun* experience. S12 stated that, although he felt pressured, in return he got the opportunity to learn to use the applications of Windows Movie Maker software. This conversation appears in Extract 5.10.

**Extract 5.10**

- S12: *Because editing was the easy part. When I did it, I did it after class at 4.15 pm until 8 pm. I did not know how to do it at that time, so I was trying and experimenting until I got it.*  
 S11: *I helped him*  
 S12: *[We] had to edit the videos, and then at 10.30 pm we continued editing*  
 Fariza: *Did you enjoy doing that?*

- S12: *Yes.*  
 S11: *Really? I thought you felt pressured at that time? (laughs)*  
 Fariza: *You felt pressured?*  
 S12: *I was a bit tensed, but I got to learn on how to use the Movie Maker software.*  
 Fariza: *So, you faced a few difficulties in completing the assignment, you felt pressured, however, it was a fun experience?*  
 S11: *Yes.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In Extract 5.11, the students reinforced their opinion on this point by sharing their experiences of working under stress in completing their documentaries. Those stressful situations did not deter their motivation in completing the project. It appeared that the students were enjoying the challenge of completing the task purely for the thrills and sense of adventure in the context of learning.

#### **Extract 5.11**

- Fariza: *Okay, did you face any problems in completing this [multiliteracies] project?*  
 S2: *There were a few, but we managed to solve them.*  
 S6: *There were a few conflicts.*  
 S2: *Yes, conflicts.*  
 S6: *Sometimes, we would feel tensed because when we were doing the videos, we kept on repeating doing the same thing, so it was a bit exhaustive for everyone.*  
 S1: *Yes, yes, then everyone got angry easily.*  
 S6: *Yeah, it seemed that we were emotionally stressed.*  
 Fariza: *You felt stressed during the project?*  
 S6: *But then, we got over it.*  
 S2: *We managed to solve the issue.*  
 S6: *We kept on repeating the same things, and then we also have time constraints, so everybody was a bit stressed out.*  
 S1: *Yeah, a bit stressed out.*  
 Fariza: *Then, why didn't you guys give up?*  
 S1: *We could not do that; we won't get marks if we do that.*  
 S6: *No, no, no, not because of that. We liked doing it, so we did not give up.*  
 S2: *Yeah. Even though it was a bit stressful, but the overall experience was enjoyable.*  
 All students: *Yes, yes.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In Extract 5.11 the students began by explaining the challenges or stressful situations they had faced in completing their second multiliteracies project. S6 mentioned that they felt pressured because during the recording of the documentary, they had to repeat the same process over and over again. According to S1, the repetitive task put a considerable amount of pressure on her group members causing them to lose temper easily. S6 added that the process of completing the project was quite emotional for all members; however, in the end they managed to overcome the issues through group discussion. When asked for the factors that motivated the students to continue working on the task, S1 claimed that their motivation was to obtain a better grade; a highly regarded criterion by students coming from an examination-based learning contexts. S6 then, admitted that she was motivated by the exultation she experienced while learning using the multiliteracies approach; and this statement was later confirmed by S2 and S1.

Amidst the difficulties and challenges of completing the multiliteracies project, the students saw learning as risky, challenging, yet fun. This point brought to our attention the question of correlation between learning and the sense of adventure or exploration. As the students were from an examination-based learning culture, they were not trained to explore ideas beyond the practice of providing the correct answers to examination questions based on prepared schemata. This type of learning encourages basic thinking skills such as identifying and comprehending focal points. The research team believed that through the multiliteracies approach the students were exposed to other thinking skills such as synthesizing, analysing, evaluating and applying knowledge (Professional discussion, 2 February 2011). A sense of adventure as described by the students could be seen as the sense of exploration

students went through as they ventured into an area that is closely related to their lives outside the classroom and beyond examination schemata.

The element of adventure in learning could be related to the concept of zone of proximal development in the socio-cultural theory. In the concept of zone of proximal development a learner moves from his actual mental development to a new mental development with the help of an expert such as teachers and/or more capable peers (Verenikina, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Socio-cultural theory suggests that in encouraging learning, teachers should challenge the students with activities that expand or challenge their present knowledge. In relation to the current research project, the multiliteracies project was used as a vehicle for the students to explore learning. The students noted that they had previously not done any assignment that resembled the multiliteracies project and claimed that the multiliteracies project was something new to them. These points could mark their existing knowledge and skills. In producing the documentary, the students learnt how to make videos using technological resources, conduct a mini research activity, analyse the research findings and present the findings in the form of a documentary through a collaborative effort with peers and facilitation by teachers. The sense of adventure originated from their experiences of negotiating learning, as they moved from their actual skills and knowledge to new skills and knowledge that were acquired through completing the multiliteracies project (Research journal, 13 January 2012).

## **Learning beyond the classroom walls: Linking classroom learning to the practical knowledge**

Data indicated that our multiliteracies approach managed to construct a link between classroom learning and practical knowledge, a link that is often missing in Malaysian learning contexts that focus on examination success. Data show that the students acknowledged the interconnectedness between their classroom learning and practical knowledge during learning through our multiliteracies module. This point was evidenced in Extract 5.12. In addition to this point, we were also investigating the students' experiences and opinions regarding activities that connect theoretical knowledge to practical knowledge.

### **Extract 5.12**

- Fariza: *Do you think that our exercises in the classroom helped you to carry out the multiliteracies project? For example, the survey we did in the classroom.*
- S12: *Umm, yup. The part where we learnt about creating survey questions has helped a lot in carrying out the assignment.*
- S10: *Our learning in the classroom helped a lot in completing our outdoor assignment.*
- S11: *It [classroom learning] has a lot of relations to assignment 2.*
- S10: *It [classroom learning] helped a lot.*
- S12: *Our classroom activities were like a theory class and a workshop. After we learn the theories in the classroom, we have a workshop, which was Assignment 2.*
- S11: *Yes. Theory and workshop*
- Fariza: *So, you are saying that in the classroom, we learn all the theories and then Assignment 2 was the practical aspect?*
- All students: yes*
- Fariza: *Do you like that kind of learning, where theories will be followed by practical work?*
- S10: *They (theories and practical work) are all interconnected.*
- S12: *Yeah, interconnected.*
- S10: *It was easier to understand.*
- S11: *Yes, the tasks (in assignment 2) were not difficult as we have understood the concept earlier (through classroom learning).*
- Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

To describe the nature of our multiliteracies approach, S12 gave an analogy of the theory-workshop learning approach that he had experienced as a civil engineering

student. Usually, in their engineering courses they had two approaches towards learning, which was learning the theories in the classroom and then practicing the theories in the workshop. I found that this was an interesting analogy that really described the process of learning through our contextualized multiliteracies approach. This approach is often employed in teaching scientific subjects such as engineering courses, but is less emphasized in learning the English language. In the case of our research project, the students described how their classroom learning prepared them with adequate background knowledge for them to apply the knowledge and transform their practices in the second multiliteracies project.

In another conversation with another group of students, as shown in Extract 5.13, the students also described that the classroom learning provided them with necessary skills and knowledge for them to apply in the completion of the multiliteracies project. They gave an example that one of the classroom activities focusing on creating survey questions, had helped them to form their own survey questions for the mini research for their documentaries.

**Extract 5.13**

- Fariza: *Do you think our exercises in our classroom, for example we conducted a mini survey on mobile phone use among teenagers, helped to boost your learning?*
- S6: *Hmmm*
- S6 & S1: *The lessons in the classroom were helpful.*
- S1: *How?*
- Fariza: *How?*
- S1: *For example, in the classroom we learnt how to make questions. From that we knew how to form questions for our interview in the video.*
- S2: *When we learnt how to analyse data in the classroom, we used that knowledge as well to complete our project.*
- S6: *Yes, the lesson helped a lot.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

The students also stated that the interconnectedness between theory and practical knowledge enhanced their learning. In Extract 5.14, the students explained that activities that connected classroom theories to practical knowledge such as the outdoor activities conducted during the implementation of our second multiliteracies module, enhanced their learning, as compared to a learning experience in a traditional examination-based learning context where they would sit and listen to the teachers most of the time. They described these activities as a platform for them to apply all the theories that they learnt in the classroom. They noted that the opportunity to meet community members and interview real people, rather than the usual in-class decontextualized role playing activities, provided them with a wider learning scope. It could be concluded that the learning experience was more authentic and contributed more to learning, therefore motivating the students to learn. This situation was concurrent to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theories as well as the concepts of multiliteracies pedagogy (The New London Group, 1999, 2000), where these theories suggest that learning occurs best when students negotiate learning through interaction with their socio-cultural surroundings.

**Extract 5.14**

- S6: *I think the outdoor activity supports our learning in the classroom*  
 S1: *It is a balance*  
 Fariza: *So you would like to have a balance of outdoor activities and classroom learning?*  
 S6 & S1 *Yes,*  
 S6: *I don't want to learn just in the classroom.*  
 S1: *Yes, not in the classroom only.*  
 Fariza: *Why?*  
 S2: *In the classroom we would sit and listen to the teachers all day. If we go outside, we get to do a lot of things.*  
 S6: *We get to do activities and we get to move around*  
 S2: *Yes, then we would not feel sleepy.*  
 S6: *If we learn outside the classroom, I feel happy; it is an enjoyable thing to do.*  
 Fariza: *Enjoyable?*  
 All students: *Yes.*



- Fariza: *Do you think that meeting your community members is an interesting experience?*
- S2: *Yes, [it was] interesting.*
- S1: *We got to interview real life people,*
- S2: *ask people's opinions.*
- S6: *Yeah, we got to meet and interview people. From that experience, we learnt a lot, the real situation. Usually we hear from other people, but now, we got to do it ourselves.*
- Fariza: *So, you had the opportunity to experience it yourselves, right?*
- S6: *Yes*
- Fariza: *Do you think that this activity motivated you to learn? Did you feel like you want to learn more through this activity*
- S6: *Yes!*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

### **A shift to critical minds: A shift from copy- paste culture to authenticity**

Throughout the second cycle of the research project, the students demonstrated instances of shifting from the *copy-paste* culture (plagiarism) to authenticity. In one instance, the students showed me a paragraph, a script for the host of their documentary show. I noted in my research journal that I remembered reading the script and I told the students that it was not an English language script. It was messy and the articles and prepositions were wrong, including the word order, making the paragraph impossible to comprehend. The students at that time laughed at my honest comments and they confessed to me that they used a free online translating service provided by *Google Translate* in order to get that script done. At that time I told them that it was easier if they used simple words to explain their ideas. I gave them the analogy of them communicating to me in the English language and I could understand them (Research journal, 10 January 2011). I encouraged them to use the same technique, to write as if they were explaining the subject matter verbally. The students successfully edited the script into something intelligible for their documentary. The script was as follows, (Classroom artefact, 19 January 2011).

**Extract 5.15**

*Hi. I am Asmah. I am at [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] beach is a beach near the polytechnic in [REDACTED]. The location is at Beach Road, Teluk Bakti Beach. It was famous among the polytechnics students. So, this beach is equipped with basic facilities, example like the car park and the stalls that sells all kinds of food.*

*Now, I would like to talk about the positive and negative about the beach. The positive about this beach is, number one, the beach has attractive landscape. You can see that beautiful landscape. Okay, number two, you can spend time with family and make the relationship becomes closer. The next thing, have a fresh air.*

*Classroom artefact, 19 January 2011*

The scripts contained several grammatical mistakes; however, the message that they tried to convey was still clear, and the sentences were more comprehensible than the ones they had showed me earlier in the classroom. The vast difference between their draft and the final product shows a shift from the *copy-paste* culture (plagiarism) to authenticity.

The shift from *copy-paste* culture to authenticity was also evident in the other students' documentaries. The authenticity of their work was mainly shown through their explanation of their mini research activity. Many groups managed to use their own words in describing and explaining their research issues and findings. Their scripts looked natural and did not seem to be copied from any online sources. Another indicator was the spontaneity of the way they presented the information in contrast to just reading such as in the presentation of the career blogs within the first cycle. The sentences in their documentaries were intelligible with a few grammatical errors. This situation indicated that the sentences were authentic and

constructed by the students themselves. I now put forward two more excerpts from two different documentaries to highlight the authenticity of their work.

Extract 5.16 was an excerpt from a documentary that dealt with the issue of the cafeteria of Bakti Polytechnic (Classroom artefact, 19 January 2011).

**Extract 5.16**

*Normala: Hi, I am Normala!*

*Alvin: Good morning! I am Alvin. We are here today to discuss the issue of cafeteria in Polytechnic Bakti. From that, first, the counter is not systematic.*

*Normala: The counter has not enough money and when it was too crowded with students who wants to pay for their food, the process was slow. In my opinion, they should get more counter in the cafeteria.*

*Classroom artefact, 19 January 2011*

The group supported this claim with a few interviews with other students in the polytechnic who also complained about the effectiveness of the cafeteria's cashier services. The responses from the interviews were also original and seemed to be produced by the students themselves.

Extract 5.17 shows another example of the originality of the students' work through their documentary which discussed the issues raised due to the insufficient number of Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) in Bakti Polytechnic.

**Extract 5.17**

*Using an ATM, customer can access their account to make cash withdraws, credit card cash advance and check their bank accounts. But in our documentary I would like to show the issue that is becoming a cancer in this polytechnic community, that is the insufficient of ATM machines.*

*Classroom artefact, 19 January 2011*

The research team were also convinced that the students' documentaries were the product of their own hard work and no elements of *copy-paste* or plagiarism were identified. In Extract 5.18, Siti expressed that she thought that the students had improved so much that their presentations were easily comprehensible. I stated that the students used their own words in the presentations and I felt that the students did not plagiarise like they did with their career blog presentations. Arfah agreed with my statement and expressed that she too thought that the students did not plagiarise.

**Extract 5.18**

- Siti: *I think this approach improved the students' learning in so many ways. There were obvious. First, from what I can see, their confidence level has increased. I saw this through their presentations the other day. They have points in their presentations and we could understand the points. Second, they have improved their [English] language. I actually understood what they presented the other day. Previously [within the first cycle], I did not understand at all, what they were saying in their presentations. That's why I think that this approach [multiliteracies approach] is good. They used simple English; I think it was okay because the audience could understand what they were saying.*
- Fariza: *It [multiliteracies approach] is also beneficial to their communicative skills, right? It is not about using complex words but it is about using words that people could understand the message. Not like the first one, they copy and paste [plagiarised] and we could not understand what they were saying.*
- Arfah: *True. I think they had the idea that in English class, they have to use all this bombastic words so that people can be impressed. When they were presenting their documentaries, I can see that they used simple language, common words that we use every day and that's why their documentaries a success. They delivered their message using the everyday English language. I felt that they were 'talking' to us at that time. So, I think this time they did not copy-paste from the internet (laugh).*

*Informal conversation, 8 February 2011*

The research team also searched the Internet using keywords and sentences from the students' works and there were no results that pointed directly to the sentences used. The presence of grammatical errors also showed that the students' works were original because these errors are usually made by second language speakers of the English language. In addition, the authenticity of the students' work could be seen

from classroom activities such as when we were discussing multicultural issues through the movie ‘My Big Fat Greek Wedding’ and a short story ‘Fish Cheeks’. From the verbal presentation of the students’ critical analysis of the issues in both genres, the students managed to discuss the multicultural issues critically using their own words. Extract 5.19 shows an informal conversation I had with Siti regarding the progress of the students.

**Extract 5.19**

- Fariza: *So, they are more positive [in terms of participation] as compared to the first cycle. Even, when we began the lesson on My Big Fat Greek Wedding, their responses were very positive and critical. Their presentation and answers were critical.*
- Siti: *Yeah. They were able to understand the movie clips, [and] the issues presented. When I asked them about this [the issue presented], they told me that it was about differences of culture. So, I thought it was quite impressive.*
- Fariza: *Only one group gave a surface answer. The rest gave critical answers. So, they are definitely different now.*
- Siti: *I can understand what they were presenting (laughs)*
- Fariza: *I think they used their own word in explaining their opinions, that’s why it was easier for us to understand their [oral] presentations.*
- Siti: *Yeah*

*Informal conversation, 5 January 2011*

The students also confirmed the point that they did not *copy-paste* (plagiarise) in the completion of the second multiliteracies project. According to them, they did *copy and paste* while completing their career blog at the first cycle; however, at the second cycle they managed to do their own formulations. They explained that the task of creating their own documentary provided no room for them to plagiarize information from the internet. This point was evidenced by the conversation in

Extract 5.20:

**Extract 5.20**

- S12: *During the career blog presentation, we did a lot of copy and paste [plagiarism], so during the presentation, we just read what we had. We didn’t do any formulations or summary, we just read.*
- S11: *Assignment A and B have a lot of differences.*
- Fariza: *How?*

- S11: *In assignment A, we did a lot of copy and paste (plagiarising) and we let them be just like that. In assignment B, we gave all our attention because we had to come out with our own documentary.*
- S10: *[We] didn't get any opportunity to copy and paste (plagiarize)*
- Fariza: *So, you didn't have any opportunities to copy and paste [plagiarize]?*
- S11: *Not at all! (All students laugh).*
- Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

### **A move from problematic teamwork to effective teamwork**

In the first cycle of the research project, the students had issues with maintaining effective teamwork. Thus, in the planning session we decided to change their group dynamics by setting out a guideline for the formation of groups. We maintained that each group should have a mix of male and female students and the number of members in each group should not exceed five people. As a result, at this cycle we had new group dynamics which proved to be more effective. We had six groups and each group had a mix of male and female members except for one group. Due to the smaller number of female students, one group had all male members.

Within the second cycle, the students were faced with problems in working collaboratively with their group members in a similar way to what happened in the first cycle. The students stated that they were faced with issues on various aspects of completing the second multiliteracies project. For example, in an informal conversation, a student complained that his group members blamed him for not contributing enough to the development of the mini research activity (17 January, 2011). Another student, S10, stated that one of his group members pushed everyone to work at a faster pace, causing high stress levels among the group members (Informal conversation, 22 January 2011). In Extract 5.21, S10 explained that his group members had quite a number of other disagreements in the process of

conducting the mini research activity and producing the documentary. He added that the end product of the multiliteracies project, which was the documentary, was a result of the hard work of the team members. S10 and S11 explained that the process of producing the documentaries had engaged them in positive and negative experiences.

**Extract 5.21**

- S11: *Sometimes it was about the team members (causing stress)*  
 Fariza: *Teamwork?*  
 S10: *Yes. Not everyone has the same style of working, different people has different styles*  
 Fariza: *But, in the end, every group produced their own documentary.*  
 S10: *That (the documentaries) was the result of our sweat and tears.*  
 Fariza: *Even though you had a lot of issues?*  
 S10: *That was the end product. We had a lot of arguments, but we still had the end product.*  
 Fariza: *So, do you consider the end product to be positive or negative?*  
 S10: *Positive*  
 Fariza: *Positive. The process?*  
 S10: *The process was balanced.*  
 S11: *We have a few ups and downs moments. There were positives and negatives experiences. But, in the end the end product was positive.*  
*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

Within the first cycle when a group were not able to work as a team an individual member took charge and did all the work; however, within the second cycle, the students exercised deliberation among group members and collaborative problem solving. This point was evidenced in Extract 5.22. S1 and S6 explained the ways they coped with all predicaments among group members whilst completing the project. They reiterated that they held discussions with group members to discuss or find a solution for any predicament they faced. They stated that the opinions of all members were taken into consideration before they decided on a solution. They worked as a group, and consensus was achieved after listening to all group members.

**Extract 5.22**

- Fariza: *Okay, if you encountered any problem, how did you cope or solve the problem?*

- S6: We always discuss with the group members first.  
 S1: We would sit together,  
 S6: and we would discuss with everybody. We would ask what the issue was, and then we asked for everyone's opinions regarding the issue.  
 Fariza: So, you would get together and ask everyone's opinion?  
 S6: Yes, we get everyone's opinion first.  
 S1: Yes, then we would try to reach a consensus on how to solve the problem.  
 S6: If everyone agreed, then we would take actions.  
 Fariza: So, that was how you solve all your problems while conducting your multiliteracies project?  
 S6: Yes.

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

Other groups also employed similar approaches in solving teamwork issues. As evidenced by an informal conversation in Extract 5.23, S10 asserted that whenever his group members were faced with any issues, the group discussed the issue and tried to come to a consensus. According to Extract 5.23, S12 claimed that his group members employed effective group collaboration. S12 said that his team divided work equally among group members to complete the tasks and afterward they combined the result of their tasks to produce the documentary. This instance showed that the students were managing their teamwork issue more effectively.

### **Extract 5.23**

- Fariza: *Okay, how about teamwork? Any improvement in terms of teamwork?*  
 S10: *We had issues, but we managed to settle it at the end.*  
 Fariza: *How?*  
 S10: *[We] discussed it nicely*  
 Fariza: *So, when you had issues, you discussed the issue with everybody and tried to resolve the matter?*  
 S10: *Yeah. We discussed the best way to resolve the problem.*  
 Fariza: *After the career blog assignment, I noticed that most students highlighted that the biggest challenge that they faced was working in teams. Do you still have problems in that area?*  
 S12: *Not really, because this time around everybody had to do work. I devised three questions and gave each member one question. We didn't have much time, so when we completed our scripts, we write it on a big piece of paper and continue with our interview.*



- Fariza: *So, you had better teamwork this time around?*  
 S10: *Most [students] had already known how to participate [in a group work].*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

Similarly, another group of students stated that they had a good collaborative effort among their group members. The students described that their collaborative efforts in the second cycle were a positive experience and their team skills had improved since the last multiliteracies project within the first cycle. In Extract 5.24, S1 and S6 noted that their group members worked on the task together under the notion that the task would be incomplete unless they worked together. S6 mentioned that the project was multidimensional and that required everyone in the group to work on different aspects and then work collaboratively to produce one documentary.

**Extract 5.24**

- Fariza: *Do you remember during the first cycle, when we did the career blog? When you presented your work and the challenges and obstacles you faced in carrying out the assignment, most groups pointed out that they had issues in getting cooperation from their team members. So, is it different now?*  
 S1: *Now, it [the cooperation between group members] is better than before.*  
 S6: *Ooo, yes.*  
 Fariza: *Why?*  
 S6: *Because before this, we had to write in the computer [blog], sometimes it was hard to meet up and write. In this case [the second multiliteracies project], we had to do a video and use Movie Maker, so we had to meet up and discuss what to do.*  
 S1: *Yes, everyone had to do it.*  
 S6: *If one member did not participate, then the task would be incomplete*  
 S1: *Yup, everyone had to participate, some had to be the host, and some had to work with the technical aspects.*  
 S6: *Yeah. If we were to do a write up, one person could just do it. That is why this assignment is different than the first one.*  
 S1: *Yes.*  
 Fariza: *So, there is an improvement in terms of teamwork and that is why you like this cycle better?*  
 S1, S2, S6: *Yes.*

Fariza: *So, was your experience positive or negative?*  
 All students: *Positive!(laugh)*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

Through this research project, it appeared that the students managed to develop the skills to work in teams, a concept that is often foreign in an examination-based learning culture. Reflecting on this point, the research team concluded that there was a possibility that the multidimensional nature of the second multiliteracies project had encouraged the students to work collaboratively in completing the task.

Another contributing point was the group dynamics that we had created earlier. Within the first cycle the students worked in a large group which consisted of their own friends from the same gender group. Within this cycle, they worked in smaller groups with around four to five members in each group. The mix between male and female members also contributed to the effectiveness of group work because it provided diversity and different perspectives (Professional discussion, 2 February 2012). Extract 5.25 shows a conversation among the research team members in a professional discussion. The research team were discussing the effectiveness of the group dynamics in the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project. We agreed that the diversity of group members encouraged the students to consider their task using multiple perspectives.

**Extract 5.25**

Siti: *It is good to see that everyone was involved [in the second multiliteracies project] right?*  
 Arfah: *Yeah*  
 Siti: *Usually students, if they don't know how to do something, they just abandoned the task right?*  
 Fariza: *Yup. I was also surprised because everybody was involved in the making of the video. My students [the ones I interviewed] commented about teamwork, they said that they got 100% commitment from everybody. I was surprised because some*

*students had problems in terms of giving commitment before this and this time around they don't have that issue anymore.*

Siti: *No, no, they don't have any problems anymore.*

Arfah: *because the first time was an adjustment period. My students said that the first time was a disaster because, they didn't work together. This time around, everybody worked together, they liked working with the mix of boys and girls (laugh)*

Siti: *(laugh)They have known each other and they [the male students] wanted to work with the girls, but they were shy.*

Fariza: *I think that the students, with their new groups, had new perspectives because the members were not their good friends. And of course boys see things differently and girls see the same thing in a different way. That's what contributed to their good teamwork.*

Siti: *Yeah, I think the diversity helped. We made the right choice (laugh).*

Arfah: *Yeah, when I talked to a group of female students, they mentioned that they prefer working in the new group because they worked well together, like each one has certain expertise, so it makes it easier to divide the task.*

*Informal conversation, 2 February 2011*

### **An outcome of the teacher-student interactions**

In the planning section, the research team decided to foster a close relationship with the students to address issues of students' reluctance in expressing opinions as well as the lack of a sense of agency amongst students. We had identified the cultural hierarchical relationship between teachers and students to be at the root of these issues; therefore, we aimed to reduce the gap between teachers and students through casual teacher-student interactions throughout the implementation of the Multiliteracies Project. These teacher-student interactions were specifically carried out through consultation sessions that were set at the end of the first cycle. However, the interactions were not exclusive to these consultation sessions. Teacher-students interactions occurred throughout the learning process.

At the beginning, the consultation sessions was made compulsory for the students. They were instructed to produce a written document regarding their group's progress

in completing their documentary. Arfah and I looked at the progress reports and conducted casual interactions with the students in their small groups to address the issues that the students had raised in the written documents. This step appeared to be a practice of coercion; however, it was needed to give the students a boost in having the courage to talk to their superiors, in this case, Arfah and I. With this element of strong persuasion, we made the first attempt in breaking the barrier between teachers and students.

In these teacher-student interactions, we addressed students' learning issues directly in the classroom through informal conversations. At the beginning, the students had reservations talking to Arfah and me in such a casual manner. The students were heavily influenced by the cultural hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in which they were not used to informal and casual teacher-students communications. The data show that our efforts encouraged the students to overcome their issues in expressing opinions. When we first attempted to talk to the students, they were still quite reserved and submissive. Even though Arfah and I went to each group to discuss the issues raised in their progress reports, they were still hesitant to ask questions or raise any issue pertinent to the discussion. Most students sat quietly and listened carefully to our explanations. Some students nodded their heads, perhaps indicating agreement or understanding of the explanations (Observational notes, 10 January 2011).

As we held more consultation sessions, the students began to open up to us. The students raised more issues in addition to those written in their progress report documents. They were more spontaneous and more involved in the discussion

process. For example, one group of students voluntarily consulted me regarding possible ways to discuss the issue of Bakti Polytechnic students' campus lifestyle. They were unsure of the focus of their mini research activity as the topic was quite general. We then engaged in a critical discussion on possible ways for them to shape their mini research activity in which the contribution of ideas came from the group members as well as me (Research journal, 17 January 2011). In another event, a group of students shared their scripts with me. They were telling me the concepts they had chosen for their documentary and required assistance in developing the scripts for the host. Together, we analysed the scripts and we were also engaged in a critical discussion on how to develop their scripts further. They told me that they used a free online translation service to create the scripts and we discussed other ways that they could employ in developing a good piece of script for the host of the documentary.

***An outcome of the teacher-student interactions: A move from passive to expressive***

Data shows that as a result of our enhanced teacher-student interactions, the students had moved from being passive and submissive to being expressive. This was evidenced in the overwhelming responses and elaboration in terms of the focus group students' answers towards interview questions in our informal conversations. At the second cycle, the students were more willing to describe and share their learning experiences using the multiliteracies approach. For example, this is indicated by a comparison between the students' responses to almost similar questions in the first cycle and the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project. Extract 5.26 illustrates an informal conversation in the first cycle, and Extract 5.27 illustrates

an informal conversation that occurred at the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project.

**Extract 5.26**

- Fariza: *What were your first thoughts when you read the assignments' description?*  
*Silent.*
- S11: *It was difficult.*
- Fariza: *Why?*
- S11: *Umm, because we had to create a blog.*
- Fariza: *Why was it difficult to create a blog?*
- S11: *Umm,*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

**Extract 5.27**

- Fariza: *When you read the description of your second assignment for the first time, how did you feel at that time?*
- S6: *Shocked.*
- S1: *Shocked (laughs).*
- Fariza: *Why?*
- S1: *Because we haven't done it before, we have never done that kind of assignment.*
- S6: *Never done it before. Before this, in school, we did a lot of homework.*
- S1: *Never done it before, I have never done my own video. Never!*
- Fariza: *Ooo, you have never done this kind of assignment?*
- S6: *This is our first time (laughs)*
- Fariza: *Your first time? What kind of work that you usually do in schools?*
- S1: *In school, we used to do a lot of writing*
- S6: *We used to have discussions, just normal conversations.*
- Fariza: *And then, what did you do after the discussions?*
- S1: *We had to write papers.*
- S2: *Yup, we used books and mah-jong papers ( to write their discussion findings)*
- S6: *Yes, we wrote [our answers] on the mah-jong papers and then we presented [to the class]. That was a normal scenario, but when we do this [the multiliteracies project], it is a new thing for us.*
- Fariza: *It was a new experience to you and that is why you were shocked?*
- S2,S6, *Yes.*
- S1:
- S2: *A bit shocked*
- S6: *Yes, shocked. But, it was kinda fun.*
- S1: *I couldn't wait to do it.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

It appeared from the two conversation excerpts in Extract 5.26 and Extract 5.27 that the students' responses in the first cycle and the second cycle differed hugely not only in terms of volume of information but also in depth. In the second cycle, the students were more descriptive and more willing to share their ideas and experiences. They managed to explain the reasons why they felt shocked when they first read the description of the second multiliteracies project. The students were also able to answer the 'why' questions quite well as compared to their attempts where, the question 'why' was answered with 'umm' or silence.

In the second cycle, students needed less encouragement to express their feelings as compared to the first cycle, where I had been constantly prompting and persuading the students to speak up, with little success as evidenced in Extract 5.28. In the conversation that occurred in the first cycle of the Multiliteracies Project, I had more speaking episodes rather than the students. The students mainly remained silent. S8 tried to express something and a short while afterward decided not to continue; perhaps he was not confident of his own answer. In most instances, I constantly reassured the students that they would not be evaluated or judged based on their responses; however, I did not succeed in persuading the students to respond to the questions.

**Extract 5.28**

- Fariza: *So, you are more comfortable having videos rather than print materials in the classroom?*
- S10: *Yes.*
- 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. Some students actually looked down when our eyes met).*

- 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.*
- Fariza: *Okay. Do you think that using the video is suitable for learning?*
- S12: *Suitable.*
- Fariza: *Why?*  
*Silent.*
- Fariza: *No reason? But you think that using video is suitable for learning?*  
*Silent.*

*Informal conversation, 20 December 2010*

The situation was quite different at the second cycle, where I needed to use less encouragement in order to persuade the students to respond to my questions. The students responded to my questions continuously, without hesitations. In Extract 5.29, the students spoke seven times before I had the chance to give feedback to their answers.

**Extract 5.29**

- Fariza: *Why do you like to use technology in your learning?*
- S1: *It is fun.*
- S6: *It makes learning interesting.*
- S1: *Yes, it makes it [learning] different from the rest.*
- S6: *It was fun because we don't have to read books all the time.*
- S1: *Something other than books. Books are boring*
- S6: *It was like we had something important to do.*
- S1: *Other than reading books.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In addition, as a result of our efforts to get closer to the students through a series of informal conversations in the classroom, we had successfully minimized the gap of the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. The students were no longer afraid to express their opinions and share their learning experiences with me and Arfah, their teachers. This was evidenced in Extract 5.30. S11 stated that he felt less embarrassed to talk to us, his teachers. It is quite common in a hierarchical



relationship for students to have fear and feel shy about talking to their teachers (Aminuddin et al. 2010; Campbel & Li, 2008). Through our student-teacher interactions we managed to minimize the influence of these elements in our relationships. The students felt that they were now free to direct any questions to us; perhaps, they felt that the gap between us and them was getting closer, thus they were no longer afraid to express their opinions or ask questions.

**Extract 5.30**

Fariza: *Okay. Next, in the classroom, we had a lot of dialogues among you, Ms Arfah and me; students and lecturers. Do you think that these dialogues helped you in your learning process?*

S10: *Because the lecturers talked to us in small groups, so the information was received faster*

S11: *Then it made the relation between students and lecturers closer, no more feeling embarrassed to talk to lecturers.*

Fariza: *So, you are no longer afraid to talk to your lecturer?*

S12: *Yes.*

S11: *We are not shy to ask anything anymore.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

In another conversation with a different group of students as illustrated in Extract 5.31, the students affirmed the same point. The students shared their previous experiences where the relationship with their teachers was more distanced. The students described their teachers as firm and serious; as a consequence they were afraid to ask questions and preferred to remain quiet during learning. In contrast to their previous experiences, the students explained that the casual interactions between teachers and students during learning gave them a pleasant feeling, making them comfortable and confident in communicating with Arfah and me. The research team formulated that the main reason for this positive perception was due to the nature of our teacher-student interactions, which were casual and less formal (Professional discussion, 2 February 2011). The students further elaborated that the warm and pleasant attitude of Arfah and I helped them to overcome their shyness as

well as fear in engaging in a teacher-student conversation. This showed that the teacher's pleasant attitude played an important role in encouraging the students to be engaged in a conversation. Our casual teacher-student conversations reduced the superior-inferior barrier that is usually present in the traditional hierarchical structure and made the students feel comfortable in approaching and interacting with us.

### **Extract 5.31**

- Fariza: *Did you like having dialogues with your lecturers in the learning process, just like the ones you had with Ms Arfah and me?*
- S6: *Yes! I like it very much. (laughs)*
- Fariza: *Why?*
- S6: *Because, it was not too serious.*
- S2: *Yes, not too serious. It was fun and enjoyable.*
- S1: *Yes, enjoyable.*
- Fariza: *Did the interaction between you and your lecturers help your learning process?*
- S1, S6: *Ha, yes!*
- S6: *If the lecturers are too serious, we are afraid to ask questions.*
- S1: *Yeah, just like English teachers in schools, always a bit serious (laughs).*
- S6: *(laughs) I was always scared of my teachers.*
- S1: *Yeah, we always sit quiet in the class.*
- S6: *We just do whatever is asked by the teachers. We don't ask questions, because we are afraid to ask. I don't know why (laughs).*
- Fariza: *So, you think it is better for lecturers and students to have dialogues in the learning process?*
- All students: *Yes.*
- Fariza: *When you have the dialogues, don't you feel afraid to ask questions and state your opinions?*
- S6: *I felt a bit more confident.*
- S1: *I feel that we could warm up to the lecturer if we have more casual interaction in the classroom.*
- S6: *Yeah, then we would ask more questions.*
- S1: *Maybe we won't be too shy to ask questions or state our opinion.*
- S6: *We would no longer be afraid. We know that the lecturer would help us no matter what.*

*Informal conversation , 22 January 2011*

### ***An outcome of the teacher-student interactions: Issues of active participation still?***

Even though we effectively minimized the gap of the teacher-student relationship in our classroom, data show that we were unable to fully instil a sense of active

participation among the students. From our conversation with the students, we noted that the students were already comfortable with me and Arfah in terms of expressing and sharing their opinions and experiences in learning. However, the next question would be: how comfortable were they in a different learning setting with different teachers?

Data showed that even though the students were still unsure about the concept of students' active participation in determining learning, they still had the opinion that the concept would benefit their own learning. In an informal conversation (22 January 2011) with Siti and Arfah, S5 stated that she thought it was important for students to express their opinions regarding the development of their own learning. She elaborated that teachers need to get feedback from the students to improve their teaching approaches. Meanwhile, another group of students, as illustrated in Extract 5.32, stated that they were unsure whether they supported the idea of active participation between teacher and students; however, they all agreed that students' active participation in the development of their learning was essential.

**Extract 5.32**

- Fariza: *Are you going to be excited if you were given a chance to give suggestions to improve your own learning?*
- S2: *I don't know.*
- S6: *Maybe, a little bit.*
- S2: *Feels like I want to know more [about her own learning].*
- Fariza: *So, do you think it is necessary for you to have a say on your own learning?*
- All students: *Yes.*
- S1: *I think it can give us more comfort in learning*
- Informal conversation , 22 January 2011*

In a later part of the conversation as illustrated in Extract 5.33, it seemed that S2 and S6 were still uncertain whether they would be comfortable in contributing ideas

towards the development of their own learning. Only S1 was quite confident that the concept of active participation was beneficial in identifying and improving the limitations of the current teaching and learning practices.

**Extract 5.33**

Fariza: *Okay, do you feel comfortable if your lecturer ask your opinion regarding your own learning?*

S6: *Umm, (long silence) okay I guess.*

S2: *Umm, maybe.*

S1: *Maybe we will get to know our weaknesses and then we can improve them*

Fariza: *So you think that you are comfortable in giving suggestions to your lecturers to improve your learning?*

S6: *Umm, How?*

Fariza: *Maybe just like what we are having right now, a group discussion.*

S6: *Ooo, umm,*

S1: *Okay, I think it should be okay.*

*Informal conversation , 22 January 2011*

It appeared that the concept of active participation among the students towards the development of teaching and learning was quite limited in our learning setting. Even though the students in the second cycle were able to share their learning experiences with us, they were still hesitant to express their opinions in determining the direction of their learning. This point was evidenced by the responses we received from students when we asked them to give any suggestions regarding the development of their learning; most students were silent and gave short responses.

The research team noticed that the students were enthusiastically sharing their experiences in learning through the multiliteracies approach; however, when asked to give suggestions that would contribute to the future development of the multiliteracies module, most students hesitated and remained silent for a moment (Professional discussion, 2 February 2011). This point was also illustrated in Extract 5.34.1 and 5.34.2, where the extracts show a continuous conversation among

the researcher and the students. The conversation was labelled into two parts to show the shift in terms of students' responses to my questions. When discussing a topic, the students were quite elaborate in terms of their explanation as evidenced by the first part of the conversation, illustrated in Extract 5.34.1; however, when asked to make suggestions, the students hesitated to respond as illustrated in Extract 5.34.2. I had to encourage the students to state their suggestions and remind them that their answers would not have any negative repercussion. S1 and S2 hesitated and after a second encouragement, S6 suggested having lessons that combine books, videos and outdoor activities in learning. S1 and S2 just said 'yes' in agreement to S6's statement.

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**Extract 5.34.1**

- Fariza: *But, people were also talking in the videos right?*  
 S1: *(laughs)*  
 S2: *Watching the videos was interesting because when the hosts spoke, they have certain style and then we have movements.*  
 S6: *Our presentations before this were all about words on screen and the presenters also read from the screen, so it was not interesting.*  
 All students: *(laugh)*

**Extract 5.34.2**

- Fariza: *Okay. Now, can you give me suggestions to improve our classroom learning?*  
 S1: *Umm,*  
 S6: *Umm, (laughs)*  
 Fariza: *It is okay, you can just give any suggestion that you think suitable that could improve your own learning. It is okay, I would not be angry.*  
 S2: *Umm, it is just like before,*  
 S6: *Alongside using books, we have to do outdoor activities and then use videos, or something else.*  
 S1, S2: *Yes, yes*  
 Fariza: *So, you want the combination of books and videos and outdoor activities?*  
 S2: *Yes*  
 S6: *Then, we have to involve the use of technologies.*  
 S2: *Yeah.*

*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

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In another conversation in Extract 5.35, the students were also silent at first when asked to give suggestions to the development of their own learning; however, in the end, they gave a few suggestions.

**Extract 5.35**

Fariza: *Okay, next. Can you give suggestions on how to improve our learning module?*

*Silence*

Fariza: *Any suggestions?*

S12: *The easiest way to learn is learning while playing.*

S10: *In learning, we have to be able to enjoy the experience.*

S11: *It can't be stressful. We have to learn still, but we have to play a bit as well.*

*Informal conversation , 22 January 2011*

Data showed that even though the students were able to give a few suggestions to us, they were more reserved in providing suggestions in other learning settings. When we enquired whether they would contribute ideas and suggestions towards the development of their learning in different learning contexts and with different teachers, the students stated that they had to consider a few essential points before participating in such practice. The conversation in Extract 5.36 illustrates this point.

**Extract 5.36**

Fariza: *In your opinion, do you feel comfortable if a lecturer ask your opinion regarding the direction and development of your learning?*

S12: *If that time, we had finish our work, then it was okay, but if we did not finish our work, I would feel embarrassed to do so.*

Fariza: *Do you have the courage to give suggestions to your lecturers regarding your own learning?*

S12: *Which lecturer are you talking about?*

Fariza: *Not me, other lecturers other than me and Ms Arfah.*

S11: *If it is Ms Arfah, it is okay. We are good with Ms Arfah.*

Fariza: *If any other lecturer ask you that question [suggestions for own learning].*

S10: *We have to see, whether the lecturer could accept our suggestions. We have to see which lecturer we are talking about.*

Fariza: *Would you voluntarily give your suggestions?*

S10: *Not really.*

Fariza: *Why?*

S12: *Sometimes, how to say this ya?*

S10: *Sometimes, we are afraid that the lecture would be offended. He*

S12: *has been teaching for so long, and learns on how to teach (in the university), so he might think that we are just kids, (We are) afraid that we would offend the lecturer*  
*Informal conversation, 22 January 2011*

This point was also elaborated in the conversation in Extract 5.37. It seemed that the students considered a few significant points before engaging in active participation in determining their own learning. One of the considerations was the relationship of the students with the teachers: whether there was a gap between teachers and students just like in a cultural hierarchical structure or whether the gap was reduced due to the teachers' effort in building relationship with the students. In both Extract 5.36 and Extract 5.37, the students mentioned that they would speak out if the teacher was Ms Arfah. They described the good relationship that they had with Arfah and how the good rapport influenced their readiness in providing feedback. Another significant point was the openness of the teachers themselves in receiving suggestions from students. Students feared that some lecturers might view the practice of giving suggestions by students in a negative light, where the practice could be viewed as a critique of the teachers' teaching styles and approaches. This was mentioned by S10 in Extract 5.36, where he raised the issue of hierarchical structure in the relationship. Being at the bottom part of the structure, students thought that they might be viewed as "kids" by teachers and therefore as "kids", they do not have sufficient knowledge to provide suggestions to determine the direction of their own learning.

**Extract 5.37**

Fariza: *You are not afraid (in giving suggestions to your teacher)?*  
 S1: *If it is Ms Arfah, then I think should be okay because she is nice.*  
 S6: *She is friendly, and not too ,*  
 S2: *firm (laughs)*  
 S6: *If we say something, she would not take it negatively.*

Fariza: *If it is another lecturer?*  
 S6: *If the lecturer is the firm type, then I feel a bit afraid to suggest anything.*

*Informal conversation , 22 January 2011*

It seemed that the students were not ready to fully accept their newly developed idea of active participation in their learning process. This was because the students were still heavily influenced by the general hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. It was something out of the ordinary for the students to speak up to authoritative figures such as their teachers. This point was also shared by the research team, as evidenced in our professional discussion in Extract 5.38. The research team were reflecting on the students' answers from different perspectives and we put ourselves in the shoes of the students and we were also unsure whether we ourselves would contribute to this practice with our superiors. As a PhD student myself, I described the scenario of giving suggestions to my supervisor as a big step for me to take, because I viewed her as my superior and I had a more subordinate position. We concluded that it was not easy to incorporate the sense of agency among the students due to the cultural hierarchical social status in a Malaysian learning context.

**Extract 5.38**

Siti: *Even in our home, we have an authoritative figure, our parents.*  
 Arfah: *We can't freely express our opinion.*  
 Fariza: *It is very cultural, right?*  
 Siti: *Yeah.*  
 Fariza: *If we were in their shoes,*  
 Siti: *We would just sit quite in the class, right!*  
*(All laugh)*  
 Fariza: *In my case, I would act the same way, I think. I am doing PhD, and I think, giving suggestions to my supervisors is like a huge step for me to take.*  
 Siti: *Yeah, it is like, umm, we were not sure whether we are in the right path.*  
 Arfah: *I am afraid if the teacher feels offended.*



- Fariza: *So, we are the same as the students it seems. We are also not comfortable in giving suggestions to our superiors.*
- Arfah: *Yes, yes. I would definitely not comfortable in giving ideas to my bosses.*
- Siti : *It's almost the same (laughs).*
- Fariza: *It is cultural right? In terms of the concept of agency, we have a long way to go still. To really involve our students in the decision making of their teaching and learning is still quite far.*
- Arfah: *It is definitely cultural. It is definitely difficult to change that.*  
*Professional discussion, 8 February 2011*

Data showed that in the case of this research project, students were quite willing to share their opinions regarding their own learning with the research team. Thus, it can be concluded that this willingness could be attributed to our effort of building relationships and reducing the gap between teachers and students in a traditional hierarchical relationship through having informal teacher-student conversations.

Based on the critical reflective analysis, the research team formulated that teachers should initiate efforts to cultivate the culture of active participation among students. In addition, teachers should also be fully prepared mentally and emotionally, to understand the consequences of this practice. Teachers must also be responsible for portraying an open minded and warm attitude to encourage the students to contribute their knowledge and opinion in the development of their own learning. Data show that the students were afraid of their teachers and did not feel confident to express their opinions (Informal conversation, 22 January 2011) if the teachers maintained the seriousness of teacher-student relationship such as in the cultural hierarchical structure.

We think that the effort of teachers to build good relationship and be more receptive of the students' ideas was not an effort to actually change the teachers' status at the

top of the hierarchical structure, but merely to make the gap closer and invite students to be more involved in the planning and development of their own learning. This practice would not reduce the amount of respect the students have towards their teachers. In our opinion, it was the reverse. We noticed that when the student opened up to us, we were more involved with their learning experiences and this made us think more about the ways to develop the students' learning further (Professional discussion, 2 February 2011). In an informal conversation with Arfah, she stated that she valued the students' feedback regarding her teaching approaches. She added that she also preferred the students to express what they needed to learn in order for her to improve her teaching approaches or even revise some aspects of the syllabus to suit the students' needs (2 February 2011).

## **FINAL REFLECTION: A FUSION OF A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH AND A MALAYSIAN LEARNING CULTURE**

### **Progress indicators through an examination-based learning lens**

Before making our final reflections on the findings of our second attempt of implementing multiliteracies approach within an examination-based learning context, it is worthwhile to look at the progress of our attempts through an examination-based lens, which was through the improvement of marks the students' obtained for their multiliteracies projects. Table 5.2 shows the comparison of scores that the students in the focus group obtained based on their performances on producing career blogs at the first cycle and documentaries at the second cycle based on three criteria: task fulfilment, language and communicative abilities. The total mark for each project was 15 marks.

Table 5.1 *Focus group's marks for Multiliteracies Project 1 and 2*

BI L	STUD- ENT'S NAME	TASK FULFILMENT (5 MARKS)		LANGUAGE ABILITY (5 MARKS)		COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY (5 MARKS)	
		MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 1	MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 2	MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 1	MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 2	MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 1	MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 2
1	S1	3	4	3	4	2	5
2	S2	3	5	3	4	3	4
3	S3	3	5	4	4	3	4
4	S4	3	5	4	4	3	4
5	S5	3	5	4	4	3	4
6	S6	3	5	3	4	3	4
7	S7	3	5	2	4	2	4
8	S8	3	4	3	3	2	4
9	S9	3	5	3	4	3	4
10	S10	3	4	4	4	3	5
11	S11	3	5	2	4	2	4
12	S12	3	5	4	4	4	4

Table 5.1 clearly demonstrates that the students showed a difference in terms of scores between the first and second multiliteracies projects, with higher scores in the second project. For task fulfilment criterion, the students were rated for their understanding of the tasks required by their multiliteracies project and how well they delivered according to the project requirements. For this, most students scored 3 out of 5 marks for the first multiliteracies project. This was because most students had left out the task of interviewing a professional as required by the first multiliteracies project. However, for the second multiliteracies almost all students scored full marks for their task fulfilment. This indicated that they produced documentaries that adhered to all the requirements of the second multiliteracies project. For the language ability criterion, the students were rated for their use of the English language which included their word choices, intelligibility and grammatically correct sentences. For this criterion, five students' scores did not show any differences between the first and second multiliteracies projects, in which they scored 4 marks for both. Meanwhile, six students showed improvement in terms of their English

language ability in the second multiliteracies project as they scored one to two marks higher than the first scores. It means that some students had improved their language ability in the course of completing their documentaries.

Finally, students were also evaluated based on their communicative ability which included effective presentation styles such as voice projections, eye contacts, intonations and body gestures. For this point, all students showed an increase of 1 to 3 marks for their second project. Most students scored 4 marks for their communicative abilities and two students scored full marks. This shows that the students had not only learned necessary skills in presenting information but also had gained confidence when talking in front of the public.

Figure 5.3 shows the overall scores of the focus group for multiliteracies project 1 and multiliteracies project 2. From the graph, we can see that the marks the students obtained for their documentaries were significantly higher than the marks they obtained for their career blogs. The highest score for the first multiliteracies project was 11 marks and the highest score for the second multiliteracies project was 13 marks. Meanwhile the lowest marks for the first project were seven marks and the lowest score for the second project was 11 marks. On average, the students scored nine marks for their career blogs and 13 marks for their documentaries.

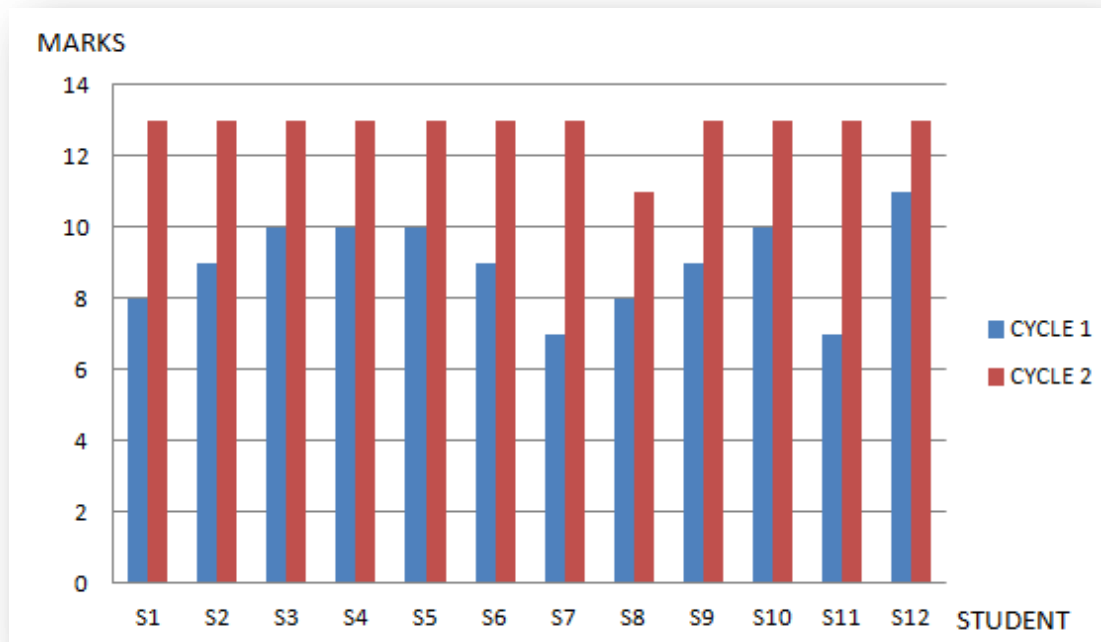


Figure 5.2 Overall marks of the focus group for Multiliteracies Project 1 and 2

The data presented in Table 5.1 and Figure 5.2, if viewed through the lens of examination-based learning, indicate that our second attempt of multiliteracies approach was a success as all students showed an improvement in terms of task fulfilment, language and communicative abilities. However, we realized that the students' marks were not the only indicators of success in implementing a multiliteracies approach in an examination-based learning context. To rely solely on the examination-based evaluations above to measure the success of our efforts was unfair and quite contradictory to the underlying philosophies of this study which used a qualitative paradigm. We maintained that the students' own accounts of their experience of learning through a multiliteracies approach provided good indicators of our success in the implementation of the approach.

## **Implementing a multiliteracies approach: Working within a Malaysian learning culture**

The research team began the journey of this research project with the goal of achieving the ideals of the multiliteracies approach discussed in literatures especially from the Western learning context. Looking at the study from a socio-cultural approach, at the beginning, as novice researchers we felt that Malaysian cultural practices were obstructing the implementation of the multiliteracies approach. We viewed cultural practices, such as the students' subservient role in the classroom, as a negative element which needed to be transformed entirely. However, after a deep reflective analysis at the personal level as well as at the group level ( see the data analysis tool described in Chapter 3), we learnt that Malaysian cultural practices were influencing the ways the students negotiated learning the multiliteracies approach. Through understanding these cultural attributes, we were able to help to improve the students' experiences. Based on the understanding, we constructed our own multiliteracies learning approach by incorporating Malaysian cultural practices within the principles of the multiliteracies approach. This point was also highlighted by Thanh-Pham (2011), where he implemented learner-centred approaches in the education setting in Vietnam. He stated that his teacher and student participants did not see learner-centred approaches as better than their traditional classroom practices. They still valued what they valued in traditional practices, which was examination-based learning and teacher-centred approaches. He concluded that considerations of these cultures should be made before implementing learner-centred approaches in Vietnam.

It is indeed significant to consider and recognize diversities and cultural practices before implementing or introducing a new approach to learning (Ha, 2004; Manikutty, Anuradha, & Hansen, 2007; Pratt, 2002). That was what we did in our second attempt of implementing the multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning cultures. Instead of transforming our traditional practices, we worked with the practices to further enhance learning in a Malaysian learning context. Pratt (2002) talked about the different conceptions that students and teachers have towards effective teaching and that these perspectives should be taken into consideration in designing an effective teaching approach. We were also looking at our Multiliteracies Project from this perspective, where we considered what worked for our students based on their cultural practices and provided a bridge to the notions of multiliteracies approach.

In a Malaysian learning context, teachers were seen as a provider of knowledge and students as receivers of knowledge. Due to this notion, students relied heavily on teachers' guidance and information in learning thus learning becomes prescriptive. The research team incorporated prescriptive learning in our second attempt of implementing the multiliteracies approach. Data from the first cycle showed that the students had minimal understanding of the connections between their classroom learning to the first multiliteracies project. They also had minimal understanding of the requirements of the first multiliteracies project that resulted in poor quality and unauthentic career blogs.

At the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project, we added the elements of prescriptive learning by providing a written step-by-step guide to completing the

second multiliteracies project and supplemented by constant oral reminders to students of what they had to do. As a result of our efforts in making our lessons more prescriptive, the students had more understanding of the second multiliteracies project as well as the connections of classroom learning to practical knowledge. In addition, the students also fulfilled the requirements set in the written document and produced high-quality and authentic documentaries. This has shown that the students were accustomed to prescriptive learning and therefore responded well to prescriptive instructions. On our part as teachers as well as researchers, we noted that prescriptive learning practices did not contradict the principles of multiliteracies pedagogy. Our prescriptive approach to learning resembled the scaffolding process, but it was more didactic and explicit than the scaffolding process. The prescriptive learning approach helped the students to successfully participate in our multiliteracies learning activities. A didactic and explicit teaching approach might not be effective in other multiliteracies learning environment; however, it worked very well in the Malaysian multiliteracies learning setting.

This point shows the importance of prescriptive learning approach towards the effectiveness of our students' learning. Prescriptive learning approaches are often associated with rote learning; thus it has been claimed that students in this context learn without understanding. Literatures (e.g., Campbell & Li, 2008; Gan, 2009a; Littlewood, 2000; Shi, 2006; Wong, 2004; Zhou & Pederson, 2011) show that these unfavourable perceptions were not based on the realities that were happening in the classroom. P. Kennedy (2002) and Kember (1996) asserted that students only employed rote learning as a mechanism for further understanding of the subject matter. As for our students, prescriptive instructions worked for them; they



understood the learning tasks better and even performed better due to their understanding. Changing traditional cultural learning practice has proven to be difficult, thus it was worthwhile to incorporate the cultural practices with a contemporary approaches such as in multiliteracies pedagogy. So, we advocate that in implementing a multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning context, prescriptive learning should be strongly considered. It was an effective starting point for the students to fully comprehend the concepts and elements of the multiliteracies approach.

Through the findings of this research project, we found that the use of a single media, usually print-based resources, no longer encouraged learning among the students. Through our multiliteracies approach, we introduced the use of multimodal resources to the students. The results were encouraging; the students loved the use of multimodal resources. It seems they were more connected to the use of these resources because these were used every day in their lives outside the classroom. The reading of passages and answering sample examination questions were no longer sufficient to boost the learning of our students in the present era.

Students were more intrigued with learning using multimodality, and we thought the traditional practice of using only the print-based resources was worth changing. To abandon the use of print-based resources totally would be quite impossible because as teachers in an examination-based culture, we were indirectly bound to the belief that our teaching would be evaluated based on our students' success in the examinations (Chia, 2011; Fung, 2010; Hwang & Muhammad Amin, 2007; Nadzrah, 2005; Tang & Abdul Ghani Kanesan, 2007; Shi, 2008; Wong, 2004). Our

recommendation is to integrate the use of print-based resources with multimodal resources. This way, teachers can ensure that students have enough practice in understanding the print-based resources used in the examination settings as well as encourage learning among students through the use of multimodal resources.

This study showed that students value a sense of adventure and exploration in learning. This sense of adventure and exploration was the direct result of learning new knowledge and skills inherent in the process of completing the multiliteracies project. Such stimulation is not usually present when learning activities focus only on answering examination questions based on prepared schemata.

Learning activities should focus on linking classroom learning to practical knowledge. Data show that students treasured the link between their classroom learning and the multiliteracies project. When participating in lessons that only focused on answering examination sample questions, students were unable to relate the skills that were learnt in the classroom to their lives outside the classroom. By providing the link between classroom learning and practical knowledge, students found learning to be more meaningful thus encouraging the students to put in more effort and to participate in the learning activities. This link could be provided through having learning activities in authentic situations outside the classroom. For example, the curriculum of the English Language Department of Bakti Polytechnic required students to understand the forms and functions of asking questions in the English language. To achieve this target, we had conducted a didactic teaching episode focussed on forming questions, and afterwards reinforced the practical side of the knowledge by asking the students to interview people in their community.

Through this learning activity the students gained knowledge for their examinations. It also provided opportunities for students to practise their language skills in authentic situations. Learning activities such as this provided a sense of adventure and exploration for the students in learning. Through this learning experience, they had the opportunity to apply their own present knowledge and skills as well as classroom knowledge in authentic social situations.

By providing a sense of adventure and exploration, coupled with the prescriptive learning approach that was employed in our multiliteracies learning activities, students were encouraged to be more critical in completing the learning tasks. Our multiliteracies project was multifaceted and involved the students in many learning activities in the classroom as well as in authentic situations outside the classroom. In the first cycle, the students were struggling with learning through multiliteracies approach, and in the end they produced plagiarized work for their career blogs. Within the second cycle, they produced original and good-quality documentaries for their second multiliteracies project. They successfully discussed issues not only using their own words but conducted critical analyses of the issues. The students also supported their discussion with data such as survey results, community members' interviews and related readings online.

Some may argue that the learning outcomes mentioned above could have also been the result of traditional examination-based approaches. Based on the findings of the study and my professional experience, I think that that these learning outcomes could not occur from using traditional examination-based approaches. First, data from the current study recorded the enthusiasm of the students in learning from multimodal

resources as recommended by the multiliteracies approach. In examination-based approaches, the students claimed that they were exposed to learning that concentrated on the use of print-based resources. They indicated that the use of print-based resources was no longer relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They felt that the use of multimodal resources in learning was more related to their lives and made learning become more meaningful.

Furthermore, the current study also shows that the multiliteracies approach provided opportunity for students to experience challenge in learning, thus making learning an exhilarating experience for the students. Through examination-based learning, students were often trained to answer examination questions and from my experience those activities do not provide challenging experience for the students in learning. But, through the multiliteracies approach students were challenged to explore something new and in the process they were involved in an adventurous learning experience that motivated them to learn. In addition, according to the students the whole experience made learning become more meaningful.

Furthermore, the current study also shows that one of the learning outcomes using the multiliteracies approach was learning beyond the classroom wall. Learning in a traditional setting is usually confined to the four-walls of the classroom. In traditional learning settings, students are exposed to role-plays in the classroom most of the times where they practice language use in made-up situations. Through our multiliteracies project, students went beyond the boundaries of their classroom walls by going out to meet and interact with their community members. The students commented that this experience helped to link what they have learned in the

classroom to practical knowledge. For example, students were able to transform their knowledge on forming questions that have been discussed in the classroom to real-live interviews with their community members. In a traditional classroom, the students would have the knowledge of forming questions and probably practice the theories in a pretend situation within the classroom. From my professional view, this traditional approach is not sufficient to encourage the students to have full understanding of the subject matter. In addition, the students would also have issues in practicing their classroom knowledge in practical circumstances. Learning, according to Vygotsky (1978), occurs with the interaction of the students with his or her social surroundings, and through the multiliteracies approach the students were able to interact with their social surroundings.

Through the traditional examination-based learning approach, students are often given model answers to examination questions where accuracy is put at utmost importance. The culture of *copy-paste* (plagiarised) could be a result from such learning approaches where it is almost mandatory for students to have similar answers or points as prescribed in the answer scheme. In certain circumstances, students were encouraged to memorize words or phrases that would ensure extra merit in the examination. But, through the multiliteracies approach, students were encouraged to think beyond the answer scheme and were given the opportunity to experience multi-level of tasks that required different thinking skills. In completing the multiliteracies project, students were involved in activities that enhanced their thinking skills including higher-order thinking skills such as analysing, synthesizing and evaluating, that in the end they were inspired to produce original works that were based on their experiences, knowledge and understanding. Multiliteracies

approach, unlike the examination-based approaches, provided room for critical and creative practices that eventually helped the students to venture away from the *copy-paste* culture.

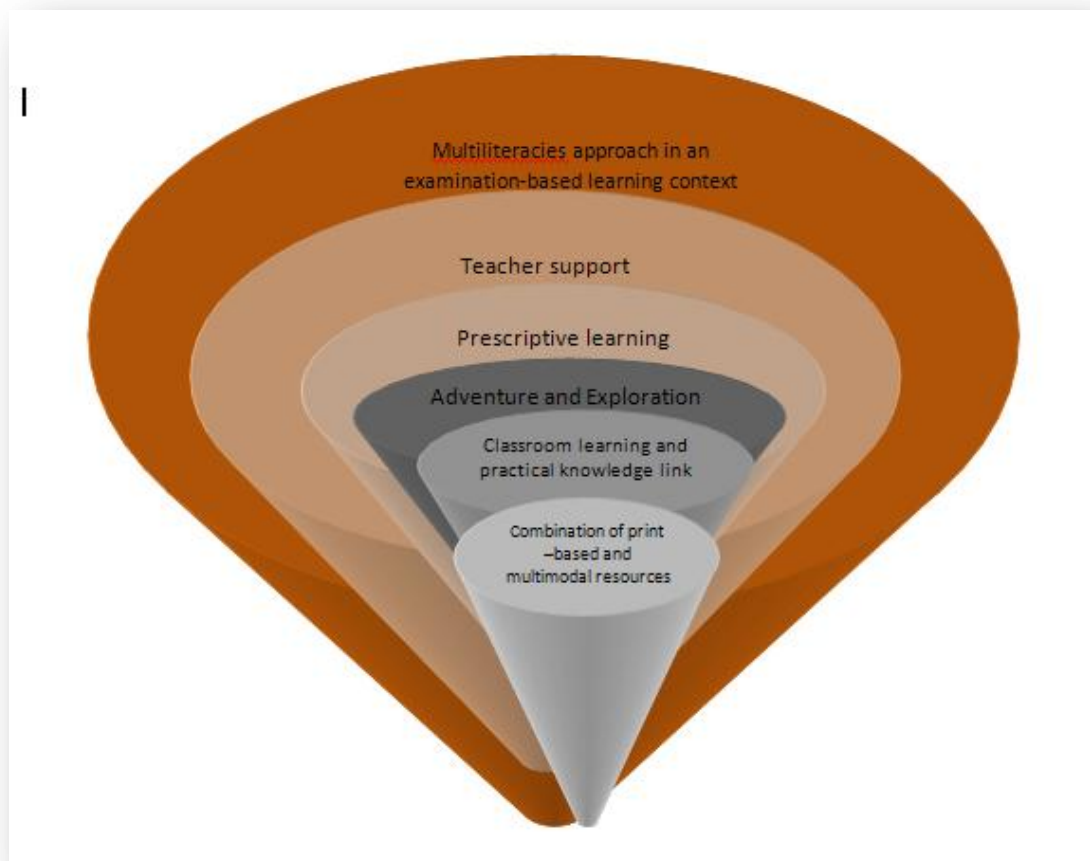
Another interesting finding of this research project was the outcome of our casual teacher-student interactions and our effort of building relationships with the students. This effort began as a step to build good rapport with the students in order to obtain richer data. Consequently, our efforts had a positive influence on the students' learning and our pedagogical approach. Data showed that, through our informal conversations, the students became more expressive and willing to share their experiences with us. In a Malaysian learning context, teachers usually hold a superior position, where the students sit quietly, listen and obey the teachers. In these contexts, teacher control is always evident in the classroom. In this research project, we noted that when teacher control was replaced with teacher support, students had more understanding of classroom learning and participated more actively in learning activities. Students opened up to us and were willing to share their learning experiences with us. This had a chain effect because when the students felt comfortable in expressing their opinions, we as teachers were able to address the learning issues the students were facing at that time. Consequently, students had more understanding of the knowledge and skills embedded in our learning activities.

Teacher's support in place of teacher's control could also be the starting point for the practice of active participation among students. This concept or practice remained in its infancy because even though the students were willing to give suggestions to us, it was limited to our learning context. The students had reservations on whether they

would participate in such practices in other learning contexts with other teachers. They confirmed that their active participation depended on their relationship with the teachers and whether the teachers themselves would be able to fully accept the concept of active participation from students in the development of their learning. This brings us back to the casual interactions and teacher support discussed in the earlier paragraph. The practice of giving support through casual interactions was able to bridge the gap caused by the cultural hierarchical status between teachers and students, thus our teacher-student relationship became closer and the students were more comfortable to share their learning experiences or give ideas and opinions towards the development of their own learning.

Talking to other researchers who also came from the traditional examination-based learning cultures, I noticed that some of them had shared the research team's initial perception towards the examination-based learning cultures. They described the learning practices in a negative light and saw the learning culture as non-beneficial towards learning and worth transforming to better suit the western learning cultures. This is where I think that the findings of this research project are significant; it is important that people realize that examination-based cultures are cultural practices, and like other cultural practices, they cannot be regarded as something insignificant. The learning culture is significant because the practices have dominated our lives for so long, and the proper question here now is not how to entirely transform these traditional classroom practices but how to maximise learning in these examination-based contexts.

To address the above question, our experience suggested that it is better to infuse the multiliteracies approach, which was inspired by Western scholars based on their knowledge and experiences in Western learning contexts, with the cultural practices of Malaysia. Based on the data of this research project as well as the research team's reflective analysis on these findings, a model has been produced (Figure 5.3) which explains the essential factors in implementing a multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning context.



*Figure 5.3.* Factors in implementing a multiliteracies approach in an examination-based learning context



## **SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter explained the data and findings from the second cycle of the Multiliteracies Project which again involved the action research process that was undertaken by the research team which includes planning, action, observation and reflection. Analysing data from the socio-cultural perspective, the team learnt that the students' socio-cultural attributes influenced the way they negotiated learning through the multiliteracies approach. This chapter ended with the research teams' reflective analysis on the significant factors to be considered in ensuring the success of implementing a multiliteracies approach in the Malaysian learning setting.

In the next chapter, the discussion will focus on data and findings of the outer layer of the study which was the Participatory Action Research Project.

## **CHAPTER 6**

# **ISSUES OF CONDUCTING A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN A MALAYSIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT: A REFLECTION**

### **PREVIEW**

As signalled earlier, this research project was multi-layered. Chapters 4 and 5 discussed data and findings from the first layer of the Multiliteracies Project. In these chapters, I explained the research processes of Multiliteracies Project and how the research team collaboratively explored and formulated the socio-cultural aspects of using a multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning context.

The current chapter shifts the discussion to the Participatory Action Research Project. This layer focussed on my own reflections on the research team's collaborative effort that occurred within the Multiliteracies Project. Through the socio-cultural perspective, I relate the data and findings of the Participatory Action Research Project to the ideals of participatory action research. Specifically, this chapter records the issues of conducting a participatory action research project in the Malaysian cultural context.

#### **Cultural clues/ Contextual clues/ Cultural reflection**

This chapter provides Cultural Clues boxes to include the researcher's reflection on particular cultural issues. Sentences that needed further explanation will be marked using orange font. The orange-font section will be followed by a Cultural Clues box that consists of the researcher personal reflection to aid the reader's understanding of the Malaysian cultural values and practices as well as their implications.

## **AN ISSUE OF POWER DISTANCE WITHIN THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

Literature (Gray, Fitch, Davis, & Philips, 2000; Stoecker, 1999) has recorded that participatory action research originated from the notion of emancipating a marginalised party from oppression through the sharing of power and knowledge. Gray et al. (2000) and Langhout and Thomas (2010) stated that participatory action research put value on the egalitarian relationship between the researched and the researcher. Ozanne and Saatcioglu (2008) supported this claim as they argued that participatory action research challenged the power distance in research relationship where traditionally the researchers have more power over the researched. In this traditional situation, the research participants are often labelled as subjects or objects of research, in contrast to participatory action research where the participants are usually invited to be co-researchers.

In realizing that the ideal of participatory action research is to create egalitarian relationship with my research participants, I was confronted by issues of status differences due to power distance that existed in the Malaysian cultural setting throughout the research process. Grant et al. (2008) suggested that researchers should avoid replicating the oppression of power or structural inequalities within the research relationship. In my research project, I tried to give my research participants a more democratic role where they took up the role of co-researchers; however, I found myself circumscribed by the hierarchical power distance that exists in Malaysian society. Malaysian society has been described as having high power distance which states that all individuals in societies are not equal and each has his own position in the structure (Hofstede, 2001). Asma (2009) also affirmed that

Malaysia's organizational structure was mainly based on a hierarchical structure, and this structure was ubiquitous to most situations in Malaysian socio-cultural settings. It also includes the contexts of my research project which was conducted at a public higher education institution. My effort of involving Siti and Arfah as co-researchers, subscribing to the ideal of participatory action research project, was initially disrupted by the traditional status differences in relationships in our hierarchical society.

The issue of status differences in my participatory action research journey began long before the research project was undertaken at Bakti Polytechnic. As early as at the planning stage, when I was searching for teacher-participants for the research project, I was faced with internal predicaments regarding the difference of status between me and the two teachers from Bakti Polytechnic who volunteered to join the research project. After a few email correspondences, as a Malaysian woman, I instantly felt the pressure of the prospect of working with the two teachers that I perceived as possessing high power status in the hierarchical structure. Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2 shows two emails between the teachers and me where the information indicated that the teachers and I did not have equal power status due to our position in the hierarchical structure.

-----Original Message-----  
 From: Fariza Puteh-Behak [mailto:Fariza.Puteh-Behak@usq.edu.au]  
 Sent: Thursday, March 04, 2010 10:52 AM  
 To: [REDACTED]  
 Subject: INTRODUCTION

Dear Pn [REDACTED]

First of all thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project.

Since we are going to work together, it is better for us to know about each other, right?

I am Fariza Puteh Behak, 34 years old this year. I have been teaching English (ESL) for quite some time, mostly in the private sector. Currently I am attached to Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) in Nilai. I have worked there for three years plus now. Now, I am pursuing my Phd in USQ, Queensland, Australia.

I got my B.Ed TESL from UPM and my Masters was also from UPM.

I am married with one daughter. She is 20 months old. My husband is also here in Toowoomba with me. He took CUTI TANPA GAJI. He works as dental technologist in Bukit Pelanduk.

Thanks,

Regards,  
 Fariza

Figure 6.1. Email communications from the researcher to the original teacher-participants

-----Original Message-----  
 From: [REDACTED] [mailto:[REDACTED].edu.my]  
 Sent: Thursday, 4 March 2010 6:09 PM  
 To: Fariza Puteh-Behak  
 Subject: RE: INTRODUCTION

At least we now know each other. About myself, I have been in this teaching profession for 26 years now. Have taught in the primary, secondary and now in Polytechnic. Did my BA(Hons) in English and Eng Lit in [REDACTED] and later finished my MSc(Psychology) in [REDACTED].

I have 4 kids, 2boys and 2 girls. My eldest boy is in Canada doing his Chemical Engineering (1st year). My second girl is in Form 5. My third is also a girl in Form 2 while my youngest boy is in Std 4.

I live in PD with my family. My husband is also a teacher in the accounting field.

I am looking forward to seeing you as there are many things which are quite difficult to discuss through e- mail.

Figure 6.2. Email communications from the original teacher participant to the researcher

From the socio-cultural lens of the Malaysian society, both emails show difference in status between Madam Kirana (pseudonym) and myself that was grounded in four areas: age, academic experience, administrative position and social experience. These characteristics are summarized in Table 6.3. It shows that Madam Kirana was at a higher rank in the Malaysian hierarchical structure in many aspects including age, academic experience, administrative position and social experiences. The first factor that determined the power distance between Madam Kirana and I was the age factor. Even though she did not specify her age in the e-mail, she once mentioned in our informal conversation that she was already in her 50s, almost 15 years older than I was. According to Asma (2009), in the Malaysian culture an older person holds a superior position in the hierarchical structure as compared to younger people, giving them a more dominant position.

Madam Kirana's seniority was also determined by her academic experience and administrative position. She had more experience in teaching because she had taught for more than 26 years at primary, secondary and tertiary level. In comparison, I had less experience in teaching because I had taught for nine years and had only focussed at a tertiary level. According to the Malaysian cultural hierarchy, these instances translate into the fact that Madam Kirana had more knowledge and this put her at a higher position of the hierarchical structure. Furthermore, Madam Kirana held an administrative position as the Head of English Language Department of Bakti Polytechnic. As the Head of the English Language Department, Madam Kirana was the leader of the department which instantaneously translate into having more power and superiority as compared to myself, who was just a *pensyarah biasa* (ordinary

lecturer). The word *biasa* or ordinary is culturally rooted and described my status in which I was just a lecturer in my university and did not hold any administrative or leading position. Asma (2009) noted that people who hold a leading position in Malaysia are highly regarded and respected due to their position and it is common for subordinates to follow their directives.

The superiority of Madam Kirana's rank over me in the hierarchical structure was also determined by her social experience. She had more knowledge in raising a family as she had a son at the tertiary level, two children in secondary school and one child in primary school. At that time, I was just married for three years and was raising a 20-month old baby. Through the Malaysian socio-cultural lens, I attributed Madam Kirana's social experience as having more knowledge. To really understand this point, I would like to share a Malay proverb that always describes old and knowledgeable people as "*Banyak makan garam*"( people who eat more salt). It basically says that people who eat more salt in life have more knowledge. This means that, older people are seen as knowledgeable people because they have a lot of experiences in life, thus they are always regarded as someone who is more knowledgeable in many areas. In my case, Madam Kirana's age and knowledge determined that she held a higher position in the hierarchical structure and I have to show respect in ways that are culturally-determined.

*Table 6.3. The differences of status between Fariza and Madam Kirana*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Fariza</b>	<b>Madam Kirana</b>
<b>Age</b>	34	Older, most probably in the 50's
<b>Academic experience</b>	9 years	26 years ++
	Had experience in teaching at university level only.	Had experience in teaching at primary, secondary and tertiary level.
<b>Administrative position</b>	University lecturer	Head of English Department of Bakti Polytechnic
<b>Social experience</b>	Married 20-months old infant	Married 1 child undergradate (18 years old) 2 children in the secondary school ( 14 and 17 years old) 1 in primary school (9 years old)

My concerns within the initial stage of the research project were all grounded in power distance issues in a hierarchical setting. Firstly, I faced an internal conflict due to the status differences between, myself and Madam Kirana and Madam Tiara who were going to participate in my research project. I was worried that the superior position of Madam Kirana and Madam Tiara would affect the participatory nature of the study. I was questioning the possibility of them working with me as co-researchers or equals. It is not in the Malaysian cultural practice for older people or people at a higher rank in the hierarchical structure to listen and accept the ideas of people at a lower level of the structure. It was considered appropriate in the Malaysian culture for a person who was at the lower rank in the structure to show respect by listening and obeying the directives of the superiors. In the case of the research project, I was most likely to be faced with difficulties in expressing my ideas and opinions to the senior teachers because I needed to make sure that I did not offend the senior teachers. In case that happens, I would be considered disrespectful and the situation would disturb the harmonious relationships between community members, a characteristic that is highly-valued in Malaysian society. It appeared that,



at that point, it was a challenge for me to uphold the ideals of participatory action research philosophy because I was overwhelmed by the complex socio-cultural influences that existed in the research team hierarchical structure.

Secondly, being a novice participatory action researcher, I was concerned that I myself would no longer have the power to control the direction of my doctoral research project. I was worried that if I had limited decision-making opportunities, I would not be able to answer the research questions and even lose control of the outcome of the research project. I kept on repeating that ‘after all this is MY PhD’ (Research journal, 15 July 2010). My concerns were evident in the following entry in my research journal (15 July 2010). In Extract 6.1, I stated that the age and experience differences between the teachers and I would impede the participatory action research process. It was clear that in this journal entry, I was apprehensive that the senior teachers were not willing to relinquish their authority as seniors, and at the same time, I myself was not ready to relinquish the ability to control the direction of my own study.

**Extract 6.1:**

*I had to say, I honestly worried about this research study. I liked the concept of collaborative research effort, however unsure whether I would be able to achieve that collaborative effort. I talked to my supervisor about my concern, right before she left for the academic development leave. I told her that I was worried because the teachers who volunteered for my PAR project was at least 15 years older than me. She said I would be okay and it was something interesting to see. I don't know why but I cannot stop thinking that this project is heading to disaster. Working with two senior teachers as co-researchers? Is that really possible? From experience, it would be quite difficult for the senior teachers to accept my ideas because I am 10 years behind in terms of age and experience. Would they listen to me?*

The issue of status differences was also brought up once again at the first meeting I had with the Director of Bakti Polytechnic. At the meeting, we had a short question and answer session about the details of my research project. The Director enquired why I chose to work with the two senior teachers and I told him that the two teachers volunteered to join the research project. He was silent for a while and told me that he was unsure whether I would get the results that I wanted from the study. He elaborated that working with two senior teachers as co-researchers could be difficult for me because there was a high possibility that I would have to follow what they say rather than work together for the research project. He was worried that they would dominate the research project and I would not be able to collect the data that I wanted. Even though I was very concerned with the statement, I assured him that I would try my best to make the collaboration work because that was the foundation of my research project. The Director ended our discussion by offering assistance in case the collaboration did not work out, because he had a few people in mind who would work better with me in the project. I was very disturbed after the meeting. I was reluctant to start the research project and started thinking of other options in terms of place for data collection (Research journal, 4 August 2010). This shows that the issue of power distance was quite significant in the Malaysian hierarchical society, and that I was willing to consider other less complicated alternatives.

I encountered more evidence of status differences issues in the Participatory Action Research project during my first face –to-face meeting with Madam Kirana at her office. The main objective of the meeting was to set up the research team and to begin designing the research project. I was quite surprised initially that Madam Tiara was not present at the meeting. Regardless, I explained the research project in great

details to Madam Kirana. She commented that the research project was interesting and she was more than willing to participate in the project. She indicated, that due to a busy schedule as the Head of the English Language Department, she had to withdraw from becoming the research team. She stated that Madam Tiara also had a busy schedule so she too had to withdraw from the study. They were concerned that the high level of commitment required from the research team would interfere with their existing teaching and administrative responsibilities. They were also concerned that their busy schedule would have an undesirable impact on the research project.

### **Cultural clues**

Looking at the situation from the Malaysian cultural perspective, the way Madam Kirana withdrew from the research project was an example of how Malaysian expresses refusal or decline. To avoid conflict, Madam Kirana employed indirect approach in communicating negative messages (Jeannot & Khairul Anuar, 2012; Kuang 2009). Kuang et al. (2012) stated that Malaysian society value harmonious relationships among community members and politeness is central in communicating messages. Being direct is considered rude, thus many used indirect methods to express their message especially in expressing negative messages. In this case Madam Kirana, stated that she was interested to join the research project was interesting but due to her job commitment she had to withdraw. The message of decline was relayed in a subtle, indirect way.

I was excited when Madam Kirana informed me that two new lecturers who just graduated and joined Bakti Polytechnic two weeks previously, volunteered to take her and Madam Tiara's places in the research project. Receiving this news, I finally had the less complicated alternative that I was searching for after the meeting with the Director of Bakti Polytechnic. Even though it was contrary to the principles of participatory action research philosophy that dictates the democratization of the researcher-participants relationship, secretly deep down in my heart, I was relieved that I would have to work with the two lecturers who had just graduated and joined the polytechnic.

My own response towards the withdrawal of the two senior teachers and the introduction of two junior teachers was related to power distance as evident in Extract 6.2. In this extract, I highlighted the relief that I felt because I was no longer working with two senior teachers in the Participatory Action Research Project, but given the opportunity to work with two junior teachers. In this extract, I associated the position of the two new teachers at a lower position of the hierarchical structure to my own capacity and power to control the direction of the research project. I realized that it would be easier to conduct the research project with the participation of the two junior teachers. Working with two people who have a lower rank in the structure means that I could take control and determine the direction of the research project because it was customary in the Malaysian contexts that a superior is given the privilege in giving directives and subordinates would obey the directives.

**Extract 6.2:**

*When Madam Kirana withdrew from the study and introduced me to the two new teachers, my heart cheered slowly. I was really happy and relieved. The new teachers were young and just obtained their first degree and they were almost the same age as my ex-students. My first thoughts were that the new teachers would be able to follow what I say, and I would be able to control the direction of the study. I think now, it is much easier to conduct the research project.*

*Research journal, 1 September 2010*

Another incident that portrayed the influence of power in starting a participatory action research project was how the research group was formed. After the project ended, Arfah revealed to me the actual reason of Siti and Arfah 's 'willingness' to participate in the research project was as a result of a directive from Bakti Polytechnic English Language Department (Informal conversation, 8 February 2011). Even though I was under the impression that Siti and Arfah had volunteered to join the research project, Arfah told me that that they were coerced to join the

research project in the beginning. It came as a directive from Madam Kirana as the Head of English Department for them to participate in the research project. Due to their position as juniors in the department and the fact that they had just started work at Bakti Polytechnic two weeks previously, they agreed to join the research project as directed.

As a researcher who knew the workings of the hierarchical organization in Malaysian educational setting, I knew that coerced participation was likely. I began to question my own effort of making sure that their participation was totally voluntary and absent of any elements of coercion, which was not likely in most Malaysian contexts. After Siti and Arfah signed the consent form, I did not investigate the issue of their participation deeper. Maybe at that time, my judgement was clouded by my relief at having an easy and less complicated option for conducting the participatory action project. Arfah then highlighted that even though their participation was initially coerced, her research experiences in the participatory action research project had totally changed her mind and she was willing to participate in the research process.

From the incidents mentioned before, it appeared that the issue of status differences according to position in the hierarchy was quite significant in Malaysian society. Firstly, the main issue raised was the possibility of equal power distribution among the team members as subscribed by the participatory action research philosophy. In the case of my Participatory Action Research Project, the collaboration between seniors and juniors raised relevant issues. Even, as a participatory action researcher myself, I had concerns regarding power distance in the research relationship and the

concerns were further reinforced through the Director's comment regarding the initial participatory action research group members. Secondly, my own issue as the initiator of a participatory action research was about relinquishing the power to control the direction of the study. This was evident by the different responses I had towards the situation of working with senior lecturers and working with two junior lecturers. I was concerned about the possibility of having equal status when thinking about working with the two senior lecturers. Surprisingly, my considerations of working with two new lecturers dealt with the issue of using status differences to complete the research project. In both, the issue of power distance was quite significant in initiating a participatory action research project in a hierarchical structure.

In short, the implication of the hierarchical structure of Malaysian context towards the participatory action research process were:

1. issues of equal power distribution among members of participatory action research team because of different positions in the social structure;
2. issues of power sharing between the initiator of the research project and the other participants.

## **ISSUES OF EMPOWERMENT WITHIN THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

### **Teachers moving from supportive research subordinates to active co-researchers**

The beginning of this chapter discussed the influence of status differences within the research relationship in starting the Participatory Action Research Project. This section will discuss the status differences within the research team and how it influenced the collaborative research processes. It then highlights how the lecturers, who became co-researchers in the project shifted from research subordinates to active co-researchers.

The collaborative effort among the team members; Siti, Arfah and me, worked well but the role each member played was initially influenced by our position in the Malaysian hierarchical structure. Figure 6.4 shows the power position between the individual team members.

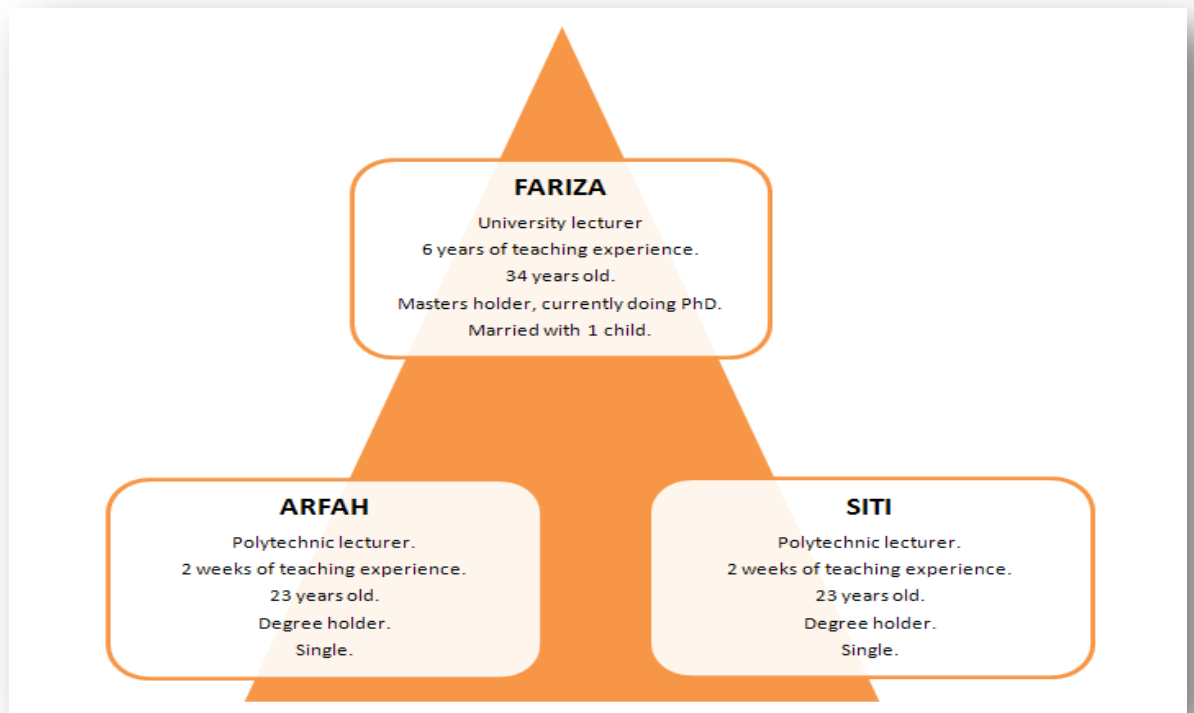


Figure 6.4 Status position between the individual research team members

Figure 6.4 shows the hierarchical relationship and status position of the members of the research team. The status differences were influenced by age, academic experiences, academic position and social experiences from the Malaysian socio-cultural lens. In the Malaysian context, the age difference between Siti, Arfah and me determined the status positions of the research team members. I was 11 years older than Siti and Arfah and as mentioned earlier, older people usually hold a higher status in the Malaysian society, and thus culturally I had more authority in many areas such as in decision-making over Siti and Arfah.

According to the Malaysian socio-cultural lens, the superior rank that I had in the hierarchical structure was also attributed to my academic experience and position. My seniority was represented by my academic qualification in which I had a Masters



degree and at that time was pursuing a doctoral degree. Siti and Arfah had just graduated from their first degree. I had nine years of teaching experience and they had just three months of teaching experience. In terms of the hierarchy of workplace, a university is at the top of the structure as compared to polytechnics, which offered diploma programs. Generally in Malaysia, a university is often viewed as having a higher rank than polytechnics. In this case, working in a university put me in a higher position as compared to Siti and Arfah's positions as polytechnic lecturers. In addition, my position as a researcher boosted my power status. Gosin, Dustman, Drapeau and Harthun (2003) discussed how researchers are socialized to believe that they are the experts and this puts them in a power position. This was also stated by Lofman, Pelkonen and Pietila (2004) who indicated that a researcher has been seen as "holding the power because of their knowledge base, membership of the intelligentsia and as managing the research agendas" (p.337). As a university lecturer, I had more resources, thus I had been given a higher position in the hierarchical structure as compared to Siti and Arfah in a polytechnic setting.

Based on a Malaysian cultural perspective, Siti and Arfah were at almost similar ranking in the hierarchical structure as illustrated by Figure 6.4. This was because they were at the same age and both had just graduated from their first degree. They both had three months teaching experience which was conducted in their final year of their first degree. They both started work at Bakti Polytechnic at the same time. Since they were at the same position in the structure, their relationship was more open and collegial.

At the beginning of the Participatory Action Research Project, the role each of the team members played was influenced by our position in the hierarchical structure. Siti and Arfah took up supporting roles, in which they assisted me in every way to complete the research process. As a novice participatory action research researcher, I was also influenced by my higher status in the research team structure and took the leading role. Extract 6.3 below shows an example of how I dominated the conversation in our second professional discussion. We were discussing ways to incorporate the English Language Department's curriculum to our multiliteracies module. It appeared that the discussion was dominated by me because I was giving suggestions and making all the decisions. For example, I selected the curriculum item that we would cover in our multiliteracies module and it seemed that Siti and Arfah held subservient roles, as they agreed with my suggestions most of the time. They responded to my questions or suggestions with a "yes" or "all right", indicating agreement. Furthermore, they did not elaborate or ask any questions based on the decisions I made.

**Extract 6.3:**

Fariza: *Okay, last week basically if we look at this one, the curriculum, the one we discussed last week was parallel to this one right, For example, our interview activities meets the criteria of this one right, Item 1.1 'To make enquiries', 'Asking questions', right?*

Siti: *Yes.*

Arfah: *Yes.*

Fariza: *And then, I think [item]1.6, we are not going to do that because we don't have anything on our module on that item, right?. But, we have item 1.7: 'Responding to current issues', we have that in our module right?*

Siti: *Yeah.*

Fariza: *Maybe we don't have this item too. So, whatever [syllabus] item we are not covering in our present module, you have to cover them after the research project ends.*

Siti: *All right.*

Fariza: *Do we want to include 'To make clarifications'?*

Arfah: *Yes, yes maybe together with 'Making enquiry'.*

Fariza: *O yes, when they interview the job task, maybe they can ask clarifications. 'Making suggestions'? Are we going to cover oral*

- presentations?*
- Arfah: *Umm (Silent)*
- Fariza: *But we are asking them to do oral presentations, so might as well we do this [conduct lessons on making effective oral presentations] ya?*
- Siti: *Yeah. I think in the assessment, we have one assignment under oral presentation.*
- Arfah: *Yup.*
- Fariza: *So, okay, we try to include that.*
- Arfah: *Yup.*
- Fariza: *Around one hour should be enough, right?*
- Siti: *Yup.*

*(Professional discussion 2, 24 November 2010)*

In the collaborative research process in the Participatory Action Research Project, the authority to make decisions was solely given to me, and Siti and Arfah were providing supporting information to support the decision-making process. In Extract 6.4, we were discussing the type of assessment that could be included in the multiliteracies module. To ensure that everybody in the research team were involved in the decision-making process, I ran through my ideas with the group. It appeared that Siti and Arfah were not comfortable in the process of shared decision-making as they were silent in a few instances. When I expressed my opinion that allocating 100 marks for the first and second multiliteracies projects was quite unreasonable, they did not state their stand on the issue. I continued the conversation by suggesting including only certain parts of the whole assessment scheme. Arfah responded by sharing her experience in assisting a lecturer for a previous year's assessment process. I saw her input to the discussion as an opportunity of including the research team in shared decision-making process when I provided a provocation statement of whether the type of assignment mentioned by Arfah could be applicable for our multiliteracies projects.

However, the process of including Siti and Arfah in the discussion and the decision-making process was unsuccessful, as it appeared that they were willing to provide information but not contribute to the shared decision-making process. They left the decision-making to me. At one point, Siti stated her opinion; however, before ending her statement, it seemed that she asked for my approval, before deciding not to continue with her statement. This excerpt also shows that I made the final decision on the assessment issue based on the information provided by the research team members. At the end of Extract 6.4, I stated that the assessment included the career research presentation and the *Majalah 3* (the first and second multiliteracies projects). I responded to Siti's approval-seeking action with a final statement, suggesting that I was influenced by the authoritative position that I had in the hierarchical structure.

**Extract 6.4:**

Fariza: *So, I think it is a bit too much to assess them with this 50% and then another 50%. What do you think?*

*Silent.*

Fariza: *How about if for the sake of this research project, we just take this one the 15% assessment, so we can have an assessment on group discussion for 15%. Do we have any individual presentation in our module?*

Arfah: *Last semester when I was helping one lecturer with her assessment, we asked the students to present their group work but each student had different parts to present, so we assessed them based on the individual work.*

Fariza: *Can it work with our module?*

*Silent*

Fariza: *Umm, we have presentations, right?*

Siti: *We have the career research presentation*

Fariza: *Yeah, that one, can we assess that and give them 15%?*

Arfah: *We have another one, the Majalah 3.*

Fariza: *Umm, Majalah 3, umm, I was thinking about the career blog presentation.*

Siti: *Yeah.*

Fariza: *How about we take two parts from the assessment scheme? Maybe we can assess Majalah 3 and the career research presentation. We can take the career research presentation as an individual*

- assessment and Majalah 3 could be assessed as a group assignment.*
- Siti: *I was thinking the career blog, because, umm, No? I don't know, I have no ideas (laugh)*
- Fariza: *I think we take both projects.*  
(Professional discussion 2, 24 November 2010)

Extract 6.5 is another example where the decision-making process was not shared by all research team members. In this extract, Siti suggested a classroom activity that involves students recording their group's role-play and the recording could be presented in the classroom. This suggestion was supported by Arfah, but I thought that it was not necessary. Siti stated that if I had decided that the activity was not necessary, she would just agree with my decision. Once again, I made the final decision about the topic of discussion. In this excerpt, I made my stand and closed the discussion on that topic by orienting the discussion to a different topic. It appeared that I was hesitant in relinquishing the authority that I possessed in the research team structure and Siti and Arfah remained obedient.

**Extract 6.5:**

- Fariza: *I think maybe we don't have to use computers in all of the lessons.*
- Siti: *I was thinking of asking the students to record their role plays.*
- Arfah: *Yup. We can ask them to take turns and later present their recordings. But this process will take time.*
- Siti: *I think so too. But since you say we don't have to, then it is okay.*
- Fariza: *Umm, I think that would not be necessary. So, what else can we do here?*  
(Professional discussion 1, 10 November 2010)

Extract 6.6 also highlighted the point that I was taking control of the decision-making process and Siti and Arfah were subservient by expressing agreement to my statement. I decided to include two assessments in our module and decided to give each assessment 15% and 20% of marks. Arfah asked a question only to confirm the details and not to question the basis of my decision. It appeared that Arfah and Siti

did not contradict my statement and accepted the statement as an ultimatum that should be executed without any negotiation.

**Extract 6.6:**

Fariza: *They are going to do a group discussion to develop their career blogs, yeah; I think we can assess them based on that discussion. So, we take only two assessment types, the group discussion (15%), and later the individual discussion (20%) for the Majalah 3.*

Arfah: *So, we are going to take these two assessments only?*

Fariza: *Yup.*

Arfah: *Okay.*

*(Professional discussion 2, 24 November 2010)*

In the beginning of the Participatory Action Research Project, there was a clear line that separated the roles and status of each research team members. It became apparent that I was dominant in the conversations and I had the authority to control the direction of the research project by having the final say in almost every issue discussed. Siti and Arfah also confirmed this point when in an interview carried out after the planning stage in the first cycle; they commented that they saw me as a person who guided them in the initial course of the research project. As illustrated in Extract 6.7, even though Siti and Arfah did not highlight the element of status differences in our research relationship, they described the dominant role that I played in the planning of the Multiliteracies Project. They mentioned that I was mainly guiding the discussion process by helping them understand the concept of multiliteracies and researching. Arfah stated that she saw me as having two roles, a facilitator and sometimes a co-researcher. She highlighted that I made efforts to listen to their ideas and incorporate their ideas in the planning of the module. Nevertheless, ultimately she viewed me as a facilitator. Siti jokingly indicated that I sometimes dominate the conversations; however, she reiterated that it happened because of their limited knowledge on teaching and researching. She stressed the point that they needed more guidance from me in most instances.

**Extract 6.7:**

- Siti: *I think you are more as a facilitator. As a leader, I don't think so, because if you were a leader, you would instruct us of what to do. But, yeah, you facilitated us more; you guided us in many areas that we don't know.*
- Arfah: *I see you as a facilitator and co-researcher because we were not familiar with the system. We were not familiar with the concept of multiliteracies, and we don't have the experience yet. It was more of you facilitating the teaching and the researching process. Sometimes I see you as a co-researcher, because you tried to listen to our opinions and based the lesson plans on our ideas as well, so, sometimes I see you like a co researcher. But, more of a facilitator role.*
- Fariza: *When you say that I facilitated the discussion process, what do you mean?*
- Siti: *(laugh) I see that you helped us a lot because we don't have much knowledge in teaching as well as researching, so you gave us a lot of tips.*
- Fariza: *Do you think that I was a bit bossy?*
- Siti: *Sometimes (laugh), no, no, I think you helped us a lot*
- Arfah: *Yes, yes, we have limited knowledge in this area, so you have to guide us a lot. If you were the leader, we might not have our discussions right, you can just tell us what to do.*

(Interview 1, 25 November 2010)

In short, I think that the element of power distance was evident in the initial stage of our research project. At this stage, the research team's collaborative practice was highly influenced by the Malaysian cultural values and practices. In Hawkins (2010) participatory action research project, which was conducted in an Australian setting, she recorded a significant event when her research team did not do what she had intended to do. She stated that she was initially frustrated with the situation; however, later concluded that the situation signified the true undertaking of a participatory action research where the research process was a bit messy and unpredictable. In the case of my Participatory Action Research Project, I think the evidence of power distance was quite clear as indicated in Extract 6.1 to Extract 6.7. The lecturers, who held an inferior position in the hierarchical structure, were more subservient and I, who had a more superior position, dominated the discussions.

### Active co-researchers

The initial stage of my Participatory Action Research Project began with the elements of status differences influencing the roles each research team members played in the collaborative research process. As the collaborative research process progressed, the roles of each member began to shift. It seemed that the research process empowered each member to improve their roles and contribute more to the research process. This section will focus on the way the participatory action research process helped to empower each team member.

As we moved deeper into the participatory action research process, Siti and Arfah were becoming closer to the research project by showing a sense of belonging to the project. At the earlier stage, the research project was often described as “Fariza’s research project”. Siti and Arfah kept on using the phrase “*your research*” whenever they were referring to the project (see the bold words in Extract 6.8).

#### Extract 6.8:

- Siti: *Luckily for you, that there was a change [in terms of the students’ learning]*
- Fariza: *Yeah, there was a change.*
- Siti: *At least, **your research** recorded a change; it shows that it is moving forward.*
- Fariza: *I was a beginning to get worried actually*
- Siti: *Me too! I was worried too. I thought **your research** would be ruined after the first interview with the students.*

*(Interview 2, 5 January 2011)*

However, as the action research project progressed, I noticed that Siti and Arfah displayed more of a sense of belonging to the research project by referring to the project as “our project”. The conversation extract in Extract 6.9 shows that Siti suggested conducting informal conversations with the students to see the students’ current view towards the multiliteracies approach. This time, instead of highlighting



the word “your research”, she showed a sense of belonging by using the word “we” (see the bold words in Extract 6.9). Extract 6.9 illustrated her sense of belonging to the research project and she was no longer assisting me to complete my research project, but she was giving suggestions to improve the data collection method for the research project as a research team member.

**Extract 6.9:**

- Siti: *You have not interviewed the students, right?*  
 Fariza: *Not yet.*  
 Siti: *Ha, before **we** interview the students again, how about if **we** have a pre-interview session where **we** talk to a few students*  
 Fariza: *Yup, maybe we should do that.*  
 Siti: *Maybe, **we** can take up 10 minutes from the class time, have a chat with the students, and see how they view the [multiliteracies] approach now.*  
*(Professional discussion 4, 19 January 2011)*

Arfah also showed a sense of belonging to the research project by explaining that she felt connected to the research project as described in Extract 6.10:

**Extract 6.10:**

- Arfah: *In the beginning, I seriously thought that this type of research would be tedious. That was my initial assumption. But then, when we actually carried out the research, we observed the class, then we discussed, and then we reflected on the data and discussed how to improve our teaching. It was really, really fun. I was so connected to this research project.*

*(Interview 3, 2 February 2011)*

Through the participatory research process, Siti and Arfah were empowered to move from research subordinates, who provided necessary information for the decision-making process, to the initiators of discussion by providing suggestions and alternative methods to better improve the research process. This point was evident in Extract 6.11, when Siti suggested alternatives for the existing data collection method after our unsuccessful attempt of getting rich data through the students’ interviews at the first cycle. In this excerpt, I voiced my concern regarding the students’ reluctance in sharing their opinions regarding their learning experiences. Siti, without

hesitation, suggested using a written questionnaire to obtain richer data. It seemed clear that Siti was taking a different role from the one she took up at the beginning of the research project. She was no longer providing necessary information to aid my decision-making process, but she was initiating a discussion to improve the project. She had become an active member of the research team as she was suggesting alternatives to get richer data. Siti used the word “we” to refer to the collaborative effort of the research teams (see bold words in Extract 6.11.).

**Extract 6.11:**

- Fariza: *I don't know why the students would not express their views*  
 Siti: *In that case, **we** try to use other channel to collect data. **We** design a questionnaire, just a simple one and give to the students. Because they refused to say anything, we ask them to answer a questionnaire.*  
 Fariza: *Umm,*  
 Siti: *Don't ask them to write their names*  
 Fariza: *I don't know whether we could use this method for data collection because this study was fully qualitative.*  
 Siti: *This is off record, you just let me and Arfah conduct the questionnaire (laugh)*  
 Fariza: *Or, we have said earlier that we wanted them to write reaction papers, right? We can use that method [to collect data].*  
 Siti: *Yup! **We** can ask them to write their opinions. Arfah told me that they are okay with writing.*

*(Professional discussion 4, 19 January 2011)*

Apart from initiating discussions, Siti and Arfah were also taking part in the decision-making process. Extract 6.11 shows that the decision-making process was shared between Siti and me. In this extract Siti and I both negotiated ways to obtain richer data. Siti was quite fluent and confident with what she was saying. The conversation in Extract 6.11 did not show any signs of Siti seeking my approval to suggest ideas regarding the research project.

Extract 6.12 also shows that the decision-making process was shared among the team members. In this conversation, Siti, Arfah and I were conducting a reflective

analysis on the issue of whether the students were showing any signs of improvement on their English language skills after learning using our multiliteracies module at the end of the second cycle. The input for this discussion was shared equally among members and was not dominated by any one member. I no longer dominated the discussion as I did previously and it seemed that Siti had more to say on the topic than I did when I mentioned that it was good that the students prepared scripts before recording their video and Siti elaborated on that point further by stating her opinion on how writing and preparing the scripts helped to improve the students' English language skills.

**Extract 6.12:**

- Fariza: *Let's look at their English language, whether there was an improvement in terms of their proficiency. Through the videos, I can see that their language is improving.*
- Arfah: *How about outside the video?*
- Siti: *I think in the videos, the language should be okay because everything was scripted. They have written it earlier and then practiced what to ask, what to say.*
- Fariza: *In a way, I think it is good that they wrote a script and practiced the presentation.*
- Siti: *I think so too because at least they practised using the language. In a long run, they will become conscious of what they should say. First, they practised and tried perfecting their scripts, later they might develop the language for real life interactions.*
- Fariza: *Yeah, if you do something repeatedly, you can develop the language. Can we say that through our multiliteracies activities, the students had language practice and opportunities to develop their English language skills?*
- Arfah: *Definitely*
- Siti: *I think so too. I still remembered their first presentation [career blog presentation]*
- Fariza: *(laughs) yeah I could remember that too*
- Siti: *If they had points on what they presented, maybe I would have understood what they were saying. However, that is not the case, I didn't understand and I kept asking myself, what were they saying? (laughs)*
- Fariza: *As if they were speaking German, right? (laughs). Nevertheless, this cycle was quite different, right?*
- Siti: *Yeah.*

*(Professional discussion 5, 2 February 2011)*

The shared decision-making process was also evident in Extract 6.13. In this professional discussion, we were engaged in a discussion on the issue of whether the first multiliteracies project was a failure as we had assumed earlier. We anonymously agreed that the first cycle was not a failure. Instead, it was an experimental stage for us to improve and tailor the multiliteracies pedagogy to particular characteristics of our cultural context. This conversation excerpt shows that the decision-making process was shared equally among the team members. I did not dominate the conversation and did not have the final say on the topic of discussion. Siti and Arfah were also quite comfortable in expressing their ideas in my presence. It seemed that they had more to say on the subject matter than I did. They were no longer subservient members of the research team, but had transformed into active co-researchers. They did not provide supporting information and they were no longer seeking for my approval when expressing ideas.

**Extract 6.13:**

- Fariza: *After we discuss all these things, I felt that it was not right to say that the first cycle was a failure. Do you consider the first cycle as a failure?*
- Siti: *I don't think it was a failure. It was a trial-run. It was like a catalyst for this cycle. If we don't have the first cycle, then we would not have the success in this cycle.*
- Arfah: *I think so too. Let us see it [the second cycle] like this, if we did not have the first assignment definitely we won't have this outcome [in the second cycle].*
- Fariza: *It does seem like that, right?*
- Siti: *We actually identified the flaws of our multiliteracies approach at the first cycle, and then we amended our approach for this cycle. So, if we don't have that, we won't have this outcome.*
- Arfah: *I agree with you. If we did not improve our approach based on the outcome of the first project, we would not have this.*
- Fariza: *Yup. We would not have realized the deficiency of our approach without a trial –run at the first cycle, right?*
- Arfah: *Definitely we would not have realized.*
- Siti: *Yeah.*

*(Professional discussion 5, 2 February 2011)*

The most interesting situation at this stage was to see that Arfah and Siti were no longer reserved in expressing ideas that were contradictory to my statement and I did not dismiss their ideas like I used to do at the beginning of the project. In normal circumstances in Malaysian hierarchical society, it would be quite rare for members at a lower rank in the hierarchical structure to express disagreement directly to the person who was at a higher level of the structure (Asma, 2009). Extract 6.14 shows that the hierarchical gap between us had started to diminish.

**Extract 6.14:**

- Siti: *The students' behind-the-scenes video clips showed that they actually did the recording again and again, right? I saw that as their effort of perfecting their work. I think when they do that, they had more confidence.*
- Arfah: *Doing presentations in front of a camera was different from presenting in front of the class.*
- Siti: *If you present in front of the camera, you will feel more relaxed and less stressful because you are not facing an audience, just the camera. Then, you can edit [the recording].*
- Fariza: *Maybe if we swap this project [second multiliteracies project] with the first one, maybe we could have overcome the students' fear of talking in front of people. It is like we let them practise in front of the camera, it is like a grooming session before we ask them to do an oral presentation in front of the audience, for our career blog presentation. Then, maybe they would be more confident,*
- Arfah: *Umm,*
- Fariza: *Surprisingly, the students were very creative as shown in their documentaries, right?*
- Siti: *(laugh) Right, I don't see that quality in the classroom.*
- Arfah: *I think it is because they were doing something they are interested in.*
- Fariza: *Umm, I think they really put a thought on what they were doing. I remembered this one group, in their videos the host were walking forward as they were talking, so that was different from the conventional way, just remain stationary. And, then there was one group actually used different camera angles. I think it was interesting.*
- Siti: *(laugh) I noticed that one group, the host, had a few change of clothes.*
- Arfah; *That was Ali [pseudonym], he had several change of clothes.*
- Fariza: *O really? I missed that detail (laugh)*
- Arfah: *They used the same setting but different shirts for each scene.*
- Siti: *I noticed that too.*
- Arfah: *I think, even though this cycle was successful, I don't think if we have brought this project to the first cycle, I don't know how to say this, but it [the second multiliteracies project] might not have the same outcome*

*as we had now. Because during the first cycle the students had not developed their critical thinking, teamwork skills. It doesn't seem right; I don't know how to say it.*

Fariza: *I can see that too*

Arfah: *The outcome would not be the same as what we have now.*

Fariza: *Yeah, I think it is true. I get your point.*

*(Professional discussion 5, 2 February 2011)*

In Extract 6.14, we were talking about the students' videos. Siti and Arfah stated that the students had better presentation skills because they were not talking in front of real audiences. Siti stressed that the students felt more relaxed presenting in front of the camera because the recording could be edited. I suggested that it was possibly better for us to bring the second multiliteracies project to the first cycle, so that the students could overcome their fear of presenting in front of the audience through this project. Arfah was suddenly silent and expressed hesitations after listening to my statement and the discussion moved to another topic about the students' creativity in the videos. After a few moments, Arfah stated her opinion regarding my statement earlier. She argued that if we have swapped the multiliteracies projects, we would not have the same outcome to the ones that we were having. This time, I did not dismiss her idea as I did during earlier stage in the research project. This shows that I was changing my assumptions about being the primary researcher to being a co-researcher.

### **Cultural clues**

As a Malaysian, I see Arfah's hesitation as related to the Malaysian cultural practice of expressing disagreement with superiors. Arfah at that point might be evaluating and contemplating her intention of expressing disagreement to my statement. Contradicting a person especially people who have a higher status in the hierarchical structure is very complex. The action involves serious consideration of the issue of power distance, face value, harmonious relationships and politeness. In most situations, subordinates would remain silent and avoid contradicting superiors. Arfah at this moment must be thinking whether it was appropriate for her according to her cultural values to express her disagreement.

Based on Extract 6.3 to Extract 6.14, it could be said that each of the team members were empowered to transform their roles in the research project. I was no longer in the leading role and Siti and Arfah were no longer playing the subordinating roles. These extracts (Extract 6.3 to 6.14) mapped out my journey from an authoritative facilitator who constantly controlled the direction of the discussion and made the final decision to a more collegial role. As the research project progressed, the cultural gap between the research team members and I as illustrated in Figure 6.4, became closer. Siti and Arfah also became closer to the research project. They showed signs of ownership of the research project as indicated in Extract 6.9 and Extract 6.10. Extract 6.3 to Extract 6.14 also mapped out Siti and Arfah's journey from subordinating members to active co-researchers. They were more involved in determining the direction of the research project by providing constructive suggestions and comments. They were no longer subservient but were more engaged in the discussion and decision-making processes.

## **FACILITATING A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

The beginning of this chapter elaborated on the internal conflicts that I faced caused by the influences of power in a hierarchical setting. Being part of the hierarchical society has influenced my role of facilitating a participatory action research. In my case, since I was at the higher position of the structure, my role as facilitator was initially quite authoritative. However, as we became more engaged with the research process, I became a collegial facilitator. In this section I will discuss the strategies I

undertook as a participatory action research facilitator to minimize the influence of hierarchical power on the research team relationship.

The most important thing in becoming the facilitator of a participatory action research project in a hierarchical setting was first to relinquish the power that I had as the facilitator and researcher. I began the research project with the cultural influence on the roles of the research team members based on our position in the hierarchy. As I moved deeper into the collaborative process, I knew I had to make some initiatives to break the hierarchical barriers that the research team had at the initial stage of our research project. Even though in the beginning I rejoiced in the opportunity of having the power position in controlling the direction of my study, as the research progressed I was aware of the underpinning philosophy of participatory action research which is an egalitarian power relationship between the individual members of the research team.

I think that, by maintaining my authority would mean I could control the direction and even the outcome of the research process, but I would not truly be engaged in an egalitarian relationship with my team members. I think this realization was significant, as I was ready to relinquish the hierarchical power that I possessed and become a collegial facilitator. Without this realization, I think the Participatory Action Research Project would not have been successful. This point was also highlighted by Grant et al. (2008), who suggested that in order to equally share power with co-researchers, the researcher should be willing to relinquish the power position that one possesses as a researcher. At that point, I was ready to let go of the power of controlling the direction of the research project.



To achieve an egalitarian relationship with all the research team members, I negotiated the elements of power distance that were manifested clearly in the research team's relationship. The main thing in facilitating the move from authoritative facilitator to a more collegial role was through building relationships. Heron and Reason (2006) stated that in facilitating a participatory action research project, it is essential to stress;

“the creation of climate in which emotional states can be identified, so that distress and tension aroused by the inquiry can be openly accepted and processed, and joy and delight in it and with each other can be freely expressed” (p. 151).

In building a good relationship with the team members, I created a platform for all individual members to express their feelings, experiences and opinions in a casual manner. I did not restrict the professional discussions to discussing matters only related to the research project. My main aim was to initiate a lot of discussion, and to involve Siti and Arfah in talking about their experiences, feelings, opinion on almost anything as often as possible. For example, Extract 6.15 shows an informal chat we had before a professional discussion. Here, I was responding to the issue of frustration faced by Siti and Arfah as new teachers, by sharing my own experience when I started teaching.

**Extract 6.15:**

*Siti: I am sorry I am late.*

*Fariza: It's okay.*

*Arfah: I am frustrated at this moment. I just received a text from one of the students.*

*Siti: What's wrong?*

*Arfah: Another student is requesting for an extension for an assignment's dateline. I really feel frustrated. I think I have given them enough time. They just like to do last minute work.*

*Fariza: Umm, I think it is normal. When I first got into teaching, I always felt*

*frustrated with the students. Teaching is an energy-consuming profession. We are usually emotionally attached to the students, so that is why we often get frustrated if we don't get what we ask for from the students*

*Siti: O, so it is something normal? I also felt frustrated with the students' attitude, sometimes maybe too often (laughs).*

*Arfah: Yeah.*

*Fariza: We are still adjusting to our role of teaching, it is okay. As time goes by we will get used to teaching and students responses, and we will not feel frustrated that often.*

*Arfah: Umm, interesting. I have so many classes, sometimes it could be quite overwhelming.*

*(Informal conversation, 24 November 2010)*

### Cultural clues

This conversation shows the traditional teacher-student relationship in a Malaysian classroom. Teachers were often seen as the providers of knowledge or experts in the classroom structure. Students usually have to show respect towards teachers by being obedient. In most situations, teachers expect students to listen and obey them as a sign of respect. If the students fail to obey the teachers' directives, the students could be considered disrespectful and the act is often seen as offensive.

In building a good rapport, I engaged Siti and Arfah in informal chats after teaching in the multiliteracies classroom. The conversations took almost 15 minutes as we were walking out from the classroom. The discussion focussed on our teaching approaches and the students' responses. Due to the informal nature of these conversations, they were never recorded. However, I had the opportunity to record one casual dialogue Arfah and I had before a professional discussion. In Extract 6.16, Arfah told me about the students' responses after the research project that employed multiliteracies approach had ended.

#### **Extract 6.16:**

*Fariza: How's the students? Are they still playful?*

*Arfah: They were shocked. I asked them to do role-plays. All panicked, they didn't want to do it. Yeoh (pseudonym) seemed wanted to cry. He is depressed, I have no idea why.*

*Fariza: He must have some personal problems.*

*Arfah: Maybe. The rest panicked. I asked them to do it in pairs, one girl and one boy, so they were a bit motivated (laughs)*

- Fariza: (laughs)*  
*Arfah: But, I could see that they were trying to do it. They are used to our multiliteracies approach, that they don't like this traditional approach.*  
*Fariza: It's okay. If we get to do something with the findings of this study, things could change later, maybe not for them right now, maybe for others.*  
*Arfah: Yeah. But to see their faces, it was hard for me.*  
*(Informal conversation, 2 February 2011)*

The casual interactions had an impact on my efforts to build relationship with the research team members. In an interview, Arfah stressed that the facilitative role that I had undertaken was a catalyst for Siti and herself to be more open to share and express their opinions regarding the research project. She claimed that I assisted her in terms of understanding the basic concepts of multiliteracies as well as teaching multiliteracies in general. Arfah stressed that she felt comfortable sharing her feelings and ideas with me due to my efforts of sharing my own experiences. She mentioned that the casual dialogues that we constantly had minimized the gap between us and she felt that I was one of her colleagues. This point is evident in Extract 6.17.

**Extract 6.17:**

- Fariza: Throughout this research project, how do you see me?*  
*Arfah: I think you have the role of a facilitator and colleague role. Because we are new teachers and sometimes we were a bit lost, unsure about most things. But, you always share your experiences, and then the notion of multiliteracies. When you share all those things, we feel more welcomed to share ideas with you. So, when we share a lot of things, I feel that all of us are colleagues.*  
*Fariza: Umm*  
*Arfah: Then, you are also very facilitative, because I don't have much knowledge. You helped me a lot to understand the concepts, ideas or teaching approaches.*

*(Interview 3, 2 February 2011)*

Siti expressed similar points in an interview. At the final stage of the research project, she mentioned that she saw all members of the research team as colleagues.

She stressed that even though I helped them a lot throughout the research process, she did not see me as a person of authority. This was evident in Extract 6.18:

**Extract 6.18:**

*Fariza: Do you see that we [the research team members] played different roles?*

*Siti: I think our group was successful. I did not see any difference in roles. I think we are the same, because we sat down and discussed everything; I cannot see the differences between us.*

*Fariza: No differences at all?*

*Siti: Yup. I see that we are the same. You did not segregate us, so I did not see the differences of roles. Yes, you helped us a lot, but I did not see your authority. We worked together.*

*(Interview 3, 8 February 2011)*

She repeated her point in Extract 6.19. She mentioned that she felt comfortable in sharing her thoughts and ideas with me because she did not see me as a person of authority. She emphasized that she thought our relationship had become closer and we were friends.

**Extract 6.19:**

*Fariza Maybe, the students did not see me as a person of authority. Maybe because they saw me as a person outside the classroom structure, that was why they were more open to me. I think they see Arfah as their teacher, so certain boundaries had to be considered. Maybe they were careful not to offend her.*

*Siti: Yeah, maybe. If it were me, working with my boss, I would not feel comfortable (laughs). But, I did not feel like that with you, I feel comfortable talking to you. I did not see you as a person of authority. I feel like we are friends, you know, the same level as Arfah and I. When I am with you, I felt free to express all my ideas, whenever we have our discussions. So, I really tell everything to you.*

*(Interview 3, 8 February 2011)*

In the same interview, Siti stated “*But, this point I shared with you only because I see you as my friends already*” (Interview 3, 8 February 2011). In this excerpt, Siti was sharing her opinion regarding an existing company policy. She mentioned that she was comfortable in sharing with me due to the close relationship that we had.

She explained that since we had a lot of discussion in many areas, she felt comfortable in telling me her frustrations towards the company's policy.

It seems that initiating a participatory action research in a Malaysian cultural context was different from initiating the same research project in a Western context. Stoecker (1999) suggested that academics seem to adopt three approaches in participatory research, where they can be viewed as the initiator, the consultant and the collaborator. In the current research project, I initiated the research project and throughout the research process, I facilitated the research process, at first through an authoritative manner although later I shifted to a more collegial manner.

This shows that facilitating a participatory action research in a hierarchical structure requires more from the academics rather than the clean-cut process of initiating, consulting and collaborating with the research team members. It was more complicated and was very much influenced by our cultural background. At first it required the readiness of the participatory action researcher to share power with the team members in practical situations. *It means that a 34-year old researcher and university lecturer with a hierarchical background was able to listen to the ideas and opinions of two 23-year old polytechnic lecturers.* It was not only about listening but also about accepting and acknowledging and valuing their ideas and opinions as equal voices.

*Next, the facilitator of a participatory action research in a hierarchical setting has the challenge of encouraging members from lower positions of the structure to speak up. Siti and Arfah had issues in the beginning with expressing their ideas regarding the*

research process as they preferred to take up subordinating roles due to their lower position in the research team's hierarchical structure. However, through building relationship efforts, both were encouraged to share their voices. In short, facilitators of a participatory action research project in a hierarchical society had to negotiate the issue of power that exist in a hierarchical culture.

#### Cultural clues

As a Malaysian woman, I understand this point. Due to the hierarchical structure, we believe that young people should listen to older people due to their knowledge base. Older people sometimes have difficulties in listening to younger people and sometime could be offended. Older people are often considered as "*banyak makan garam*" (eat more salt), meaning they know better because they have experienced so much due to their age. Young people are often considered "*setahun jagung*" (young corn), meaning they are still young and immature and do not know what they are doing most of the time. In the case of the research project, it was a challenge for me to listen and accept Siti and Arfah's opinions and disagreements due to my cultural belief and practices. Similarly, it is a challenge for superiors to listen to their subordinates. It works both ways as young people prefer to remain quiet rather than express disagreement to their superiors. Being silent is considered a sign of respect and most probably would be able to avoid conflict and confrontations.

## **THEORISING WAYS TO CONDUCT A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN A MALAYSIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT**

Conducting a participatory action research in a hierarchical setting was challenging. The basis of participatory action research philosophy itself was a challenge to the basic principle of the hierarchical society in which I lived and worked. Participatory action research strives for egalitarian relationship among members of the research

team; meanwhile, in a hierarchical culture, inequality is acknowledged, accepted and considered normal. Conducting participatory action research in a hierarchical setting was like working in two contrastive worlds.

It was like my own experience studying in Australia, where I had to struggle with understanding and getting used to the concept of equal relationship between teachers and myself. I remembered once when I attended a doctoral confirmation seminar at the university. It was held in a small meeting room and all chairs are occupied. The Associate Dean of Research came in and since all the chairs have been occupied, he stood at the back. I stood up (culturally required as a sign of respect) and offered my chair to him, but he refused the offer. I sat down and I looked at everybody else, they were calm as if nothing important was happening. I felt like my heart was exploding inside. How could I let the Associate Dean of Research be a back bencher while, I, a student sat on the cosy chair at the table? The situation seemed trivial but the effect it had on me was huge. It was a challenging task to understand the cultural differences between two cultures and its impact on my study in Australia. Similarly, conducting a participatory action research in a hierarchical setting was challenging and required negotiations from the research participants.

Based on the findings of this study, it would be useful for a participatory action researcher to acknowledge the elements of power distance that already exists in the society. It is important to acknowledge that hierarchical power is valid and plays an important role in determining how each member of the research team contribute to the research process. In my study, the elements of status difference were evident at the initial stage of planning the project. My concerns about working with two senior

teachers were genuine concerns that were common in working in a hierarchical structure. The feeling of relief I felt when the two senior teachers' places were replaced by two junior teachers in the research team was also a classic example of working in that particular structure. Another example was the influence of status differences according to the position in the research relationship. At the beginning of the research project, all research team members acted according to our position in the hierarchical structure where I dominated the discussion and the two teachers were more subservient. Those instances were genuine situations and real feelings.

Participatory action researchers working in a hierarchical structure should acknowledge the validity of status difference according to the position in the hierarchical structure to ensure that it is possible to negotiate and re-negotiate these elements throughout the research process. This point was also noted by Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010) who suggested that participatory action research process can emerge as long as the researchers are aware of the influence of power distance and tailor their research approaches to that setting.

Based on the findings of this study, the participants of a participatory action research project in a hierarchical setting can also be empowered to contribute more to the research process. In the beginning, Siti and Arfah who were at a lower position in the hierarchical structure, played a supporting role where they provided necessary information for the discussion but refrained from giving ideas and contributing to the decision-making process. But, as they were more engaged in the collaborative process, they became active co-researchers as they were more comfortable in contributing ideas and making decisions. Similarly, I began the journey as an



authoritative facilitator and as the research project progressed, I became a more collegial facilitator. These instances show that participatory action research in a hierarchical society would not only be influenced by the elements of power distance, but could also empower participants to disassociate themselves from the influences of the hierarchical power.

From my own participatory action research experiences in the Malaysian context, I realized that the element of power distance was quite significant. My participatory action research project did not offer a totally free and equal power ratio in the research relationship but it allowed me to discover the significance of status differences and how to negotiate and manage it so that we could achieve a democratizing collaborative research effort. The participatory action research process also empowered me and the research team to challenge our roles as defined by our hierarchical background.

In short, to conduct a participatory action research in the Malaysian context, one must:

1. Acknowledge the influence of power distance in the hierarchical structure in social and institutional setting;
2. acknowledge that participatory action research could empower participants with the help of the facilitator of the research project;
3. acknowledge that participatory action research in the Malaysian context could not be totally egalitarian or democratizing, but understanding of these points would help one to devise practical plans in minimizing cultural implications;

4. minimize hierarchical gap through building relationship efforts among the research participants.

## **SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter explained data and findings of the Participatory Action Research Project. It discussed the element of power distance and empowerment in conducting a participatory action research project in a Malaysian setting. This chapter ended by theorising ways to conduct a participatory action research in a Malaysian cultural context.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion of this dissertation. It summarizes the findings in all chapters and outlines the contributions of this study to the body of knowledge. It will also present limitations and recommendations for further studies.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **PREVIEW**

This chapter summarizes the study. It provides explanations of the research process and the ways in which the study contributes to knowledge about teaching using a multiliteracies approach and about conducting a participatory action research in a Malaysian context. This chapter concludes with presenting limitations and implications of the study, as well as suggestions for further research.

#### **SUMMARY OF THE STUDY**

##### **Where the study started**

The original notion of this study (Chapter 1) began with the goal of finding an alternative pedagogy to enhance employability skills among Malaysian graduates following reports (e.g., the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2008, 2009; Morshidi et al., 2012) of the high unemployment rate among the graduates. Studies (e.g., Fitrisehara et al. 2009; Morshidi et al, 2012) suggested that the roots of the problems were related to poorly developed 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as English language and communication, and technological and higher-order thinking skills. In conjunction with the emphasis of government policies (e.g., Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2006, 2011) on generating these employability skills among Malaysian university graduate, I was interested to investigate what was happening in

the classroom and to implement a new pedagogical approach that might help to address the issue.

Due to this, I was interested to explore the possibilities of implementing a multiliteracies approach based on multiliteracies pedagogy as conceptualised by The New London Group (1996, 2000). The multiliteracies approach was not about integrating technologies in learning per se, but about developing the knowledge and skills that are necessary for learners to understand, discuss, reflect and use multiple representations of texts, such as in the current technological resources to participate effectively in a variety of formal (economy, work) social and cultural situations. Although multiliteracies was conceptualized more than 16 years ago, it has been expanded (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2004) and widely researched on (e.g., Borsheim et al., 2008; Grabill & Hicks, 2008; Pandian & Balraj, 2010). It was based on these concepts that the research team designed a multiliteracies approach that emphasized the:

- use of multimodal resources and current technologies;
- development of skills and knowledge related to the use of technologies and the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- cultivation of the sense of active participation from students in determining their learning process.

In conjunction with the government policies of enhancing employability skills among Malaysian university graduate, many studies in Malaysia have focused on the integration of technologies in learning (e.g., Ng & Raja Maznah, 2008; Rohaida & Kamariah, 2005); however, there was a gap in the literatures about local socio-

cultural values and practices that influenced students' interpretation and negotiation of pedagogical approaches in the classroom. This study filled that gap where the students' socio-cultural influences were explored and examined to gain better understandings of the issue.

Using a socio-cultural perspective, I also explored the socio-cultural influences of Malaysian society in determining the research processes and outcomes of a participatory action research project. This study highlighted the contradictory aspect between the participatory action research ideal, which recommends an egalitarian relationship among research participants, and the hierarchical background of the research team members that recognizes power distance between societal members based on their position in the structure. This research project mapped out the journey of the research team members in negotiating the participatory action research process based on our cultural perspectives and practices.

### **Research questions**

In short, this study consisted of two layers which were the Multiliteracies Project and the Participatory Action Research Project. In the Multiliteracies Project, the research team investigated the implementation of a multiliteracies approach in a classroom through a collaborative research process. In the Participatory Action Research Project, I explored the research teams' experiences in conducting a participatory action research project. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Malaysian polytechnic students negotiate learning using a multiliteracies approach?

2. How did the students' socio-cultural background influence the process and outcome of implementing a multiliteracies approach in a classroom in a Malaysian higher education institution?
3. How did the research team's socio-cultural background influence the research process and outcomes of the participatory action research project?

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in a Malaysian Higher education institution, Bakti Polytechnic. The polytechnic was undergoing transformations according to the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education's Polytechnic Transformation Plan to upgrade polytechnics to universities and to be a leading institution to produce professionals for the Malaysian workforce in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mohd Khuzairi, 25 February 2010). I worked with two Bakti Polytechnic's lecturers as co-researchers to explore the students' learning experiences. The ESL classroom consisted of 28 students, and 12 students were invited to be the focus group. The students were in their first year of the Diploma in Civil Engineering course.

The duration of the study was eight weeks and conducted within two cycles of the action research process, which included the spiral process of reflection, planning, action, observation and reflection (Hawkins, 2010). The first four-week cycle began in early December and the second cycle began in January and lasted for four weeks. Data were collected through qualitative measures, such as classroom observations,

professional discussions, informal conversations, a research journal, classroom artefacts and semi-structured interviews.

Data were analysed collaboratively with the research team using a critical reflective analysis framework. The study utilized a critical reflective analysis due to the important role of reflection and action in participatory action research. In addition, the research project was closely related to improving teaching and learning where critical reflective analysis has been seen as a medium for improvement (MacFarlane et al., 2006; Noble, 2007; Osmond & Darlington, 2005; York-Barr et al., 2006). The framework was based on Macfarlane's et al. (2006) four-step model in developing critical reflective practice and York Barr et al.'s (2006) reflective practice model.

The framework I developed consisted of five steps, which included:

1. observing and noting personal reflections,
2. confronting and thinking;
3. taking action;
4. observing and noting personal reflections;
5. forming theories and thinking otherwise.

## **INSIGHTS FROM THE STUDY**

This section summarizes the findings of Chapters 4, 5 and 6, and provides insights into the topic of teaching using a multiliteracies approach and conducting a participatory action research in a Malaysian context.

### **Teaching using a multiliteracies approach in Malaysian learning setting**

This study showed that implementing a Western-based pedagogy in a Malaysian context can be challenging because of the differences of cultural learning and practices. The multiliteracies approach (The New London Group, 1996, 2000) was not a widely used pedagogical approach in the Malaysian learning context and some of its concepts were contrary to the Malaysian students' learning perspectives and practices. For example, literatures (Hwang & Muhammad Amin, 2007; Nadzrah, 2005; Tang & Abdul Ghani Kanesan, 2007) showed that most Malaysian learning focused on using print-based resources and emphasizing examination success; meanwhile a multiliteracies approach recommended learning using multimodal resources to develop multiple literacies.

The first cycle of this study (Chapter 4) showed that the students, who were accustomed to learning English as a Second Language (ESL) using textbooks and examination question practices, faced challenges when learning using a multiliteracies approach. Firstly, they had issues with learning using technologies. Data showed that the students were highly engaged in learning sessions that utilized multimodal resources; however, in doing individual tasks some students had issues in handling the technologies because they preferred to browse personal social network websites. Furthermore, it seemed that the students had limited knowledge in using multimodal resources and technologies for learning as most students plagiarized (copy-paste culture) from the Internet to complete classroom tasks and the first multiliteracies project. For example, the content of their career blogs (the first multiliteracies project) was a result of copying from other websites. Secondly, the students demonstrated that they were struggling in negotiating 21<sup>st</sup> century skills



such as oral presentation skills, critical thinking, and peer-collaborative works, and active and collaborative participation in designing classroom learning. In giving oral presentations, students displayed poor presentations skills by reading from the LCD projector screen. In addition, the students reported significant issues in working in teams effectively, where some students completed the tasks on behalf of their group members. Additionally, when the research team asked the students to share their learning experiences, most of the students chose to avoid answering the questions by remaining silent or giving a one word answer.

Through a series of critical reflective analyses, the research team analysed the reasons underlying the challenges faced by the students at the first cycle, and we attributed them to the clash between the concepts of multiliteracies approach to the students' cultural learning and practices. Firstly, most of the students came from learning contexts that emphasized learning for examination success and using print-based resources such as textbooks and sample examination questions; therefore they were struggling to manage and handle technologies in learning. Due to their examination-based culture, the students also had issues in engaging in critical thinking activities. 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. Secondly, the formal and distanced teacher-student relationship in Malaysian culture inhibited the students from actively participating in the collaborative participation with teachers in sharing their learning experiences to improve the learning module.

Realizing the influence of the students' examination-based learning and practices towards their learning, the research team redesigned the first multiliteracies module to better suit the students' cultural learning attributes. The recommended amendments were:

4. The provision of more guidance and information from the teachers by providing detailed descriptions of all tasks and learning activities;
5. a reduction in the status gap between teachers and students through having more informal and casual interactions between teachers and students;
6. 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.

This study showed that by incorporating and considering the students' cultural practices to produce a contextualized multiliteracies module, it provided better learning experiences for the students and enhanced the learning of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The second cycle of the study (Chapter 5) recorded the students' responses toward learning using the revised multiliteracies module. Data showed that through the contextualized multiliteracies approach, the students negotiated learning better than they had during the first cycle. The students demonstrated improved handling of technologies for learning, producing authentic works, and peer-collaborative efforts. Data showed that the students were able to use technologies such as mobile phones, digital cameras and MovieMaker software to produce a 15-minute documentary about significant issues in their community. Their documentaries were authentic and did not display any form of *copy-paste* (plagiarizing) action. In addition, the students

reported that they had better team collaboration as they employed effective problem solving in handling issues of teamwork. Furthermore, the students showed significant transformations in terms of becoming active participants in designing their own learning processes. They were no longer reserved in sharing their learning experiences as well as suggesting ideas to improve the learning module.

The study also showed that through the contextualized multiliteracies module, the students explored learning in new ways, different from their previous learning experiences where learning focussed on using texts books and handouts containing sample examination questions. The students claimed that through the multiliteracies approach, they experienced adventures in learning. They enjoyed learning using the multimodal resources and negotiating the complexities of using technologies in completing classroom tasks. They explained that multimodal resources and technologies were a part of their actual lives outside the classroom and learning using those resources helped them to explore skills and knowledge that seemed appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The students also suggested that learning using the multiliteracies approach provided them with meaningful experiences as compared to formal classroom learning that they experienced before through traditional approaches. They were engaged in authentic interactions with people in their community and these assisted their learning. In addition, through the multiliteracies projects, the students displayed their abilities to transform their existing knowledge into new skills and knowledge.

This study contributes to knowledge about how English as a Second language (ESL) in a Malaysian classroom can be taught in a different way from the traditional

examination-based approach. Data showed that it is possible to move from learning using print-based resources and sample examination questions to an approach that uses current technology and authentic tasks in learning ESL. The examination-based learning background of the students was not an obstacle for the students to adapt to learning using a multiliteracies approach that recommends using multimodal texts and learning multiple literacies. Instead, their examination-based background was taken into consideration to personalize the multiliteracies approach.

Personalizing the multiliteracies approach according to the students' cultural values and practices provided a connection from an examination-based learning culture to learning the skills and knowledge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as using technologies, critical thinking and effective teamwork. For example, in Malaysian learning context, a teacher is usually viewed as a source of knowledge and often, teachers disseminate all the information in the classroom or use a technique known as "*spoon-feeding*" (Pandian & Balraj, 2010), where a teacher prescribes knowledge and students listen. Our multiliteracies approach used the prescriptive teaching approach as a bridge for students to move from learning following teachers' directives to a more independent learning of applying the acquired knowledge to transform their existing knowledge and practices. Through this approach, this study addressed the dilemma of Tan and Guo (2009), who in their article suggested that fusing new literacies in "old institute of learning" (p. 323) remained a challenging task due to the conflict between the emphasis of multimodality in multiliteracies approach and the emphasis of print literacy in the curriculum and assessment of the Singaporean examination-based learning context.

The current study provided an answer to such a predicament by fusing the students' examination-based learning approach with the multiliteracies components. This study suggested that although the multiliteracies approach is a Western-based pedagogy, it can be adapted and negotiated with diverse interpretations to make it work for students from Malaysia who have examination-based learning backgrounds and different expectations of learning based on distinctive cultural values and practices.

### **Conducting participatory action research in a Malaysian context**

This study showed that conducting a Western-based research methodology in the Malaysian context can be challenging (Chapter 6). The participatory action research ideal recommends participatory effort in conducting research among a group of people with egalitarian research relationships, which seems to be in opposition to the traditional hierarchical structure in Malaysian context that recognizes and acknowledges status differences among individuals in social, institutional and organizational contexts (Asma, 2009; Hofstede, 2001). I worked with two lecturers as a research team. However, because of my age, academic qualification, teaching experiences, and as the initiator of the research project, I was considered as having higher status as compared to Siti and Arfah (the lecturers).

In the first cycle of the study, the research team members demonstrated the influence of hierarchical status difference through the roles the research team members took at the beginning of the research project. As a person having a higher position in the structure, I initiated all discussions and took control of all decision-making processes. As people who were at a lower position in the hierarchy, Siti and Arfah

played supporting roles. They provided necessary information for the decision-making processes and preferred to leave the decision-making to me as the initiator of the research project. In addition, they expressed agreement to all the decisions made by me. One significant event was when Siti attempted to suggest an action plan for the research project. She asked for my approval after giving the suggestion. Seeing that I was not keen with the idea, Siti withdrew her suggestion and all research team members agreed on the action plans decided by me.

This shows that the status differences among the research team members influenced their roles in the research process. The status differences were not about oppressive power, but were related to Malay cultural values and practices of demonstrating respect to older people and leaders for their knowledge-base. Siti and Arfah's responses in expressing agreement to all my decisions symbolized their respect to me as an older person and a person with more knowledge regarding the research project. They avoided expressing opposing views because of our cultural values that discourage confrontations in order to maintain harmonious relationships, a quality that is highly valued in Malaysian society. The study demonstrated that, in conducting a participatory action research in the Malaysian context, it is significant to understand the underlying cultural values and practices that influence the roles of research participants. This will enable participatory action researchers to negotiate the status differences more effectively.

This study showed that engagement in a participatory action research encouraged the lecturers, Siti and Arfah, to transform their roles in the research project from subordinating roles to active participants of the research process. As the initiator of

participatory action research, I realized that it was important to uphold the ideals of participatory action research such as an egalitarian research relationship and a shared-decision making process; thus I began to make efforts to foster those concepts in the research project.

Siti and Arfah on the other hand became active co-researchers, as they were more involved in the research process such as giving suggestions to improve the research project and contributing actively in decision-making processes. They started to show a sense of belonging by referring to the research project as “our research”. They were no longer providing information to assist my decision-making process, but became initiators of discussions by sharing and expressing their opinions on the issues of implementing a multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian learning context. They demonstrated more speaking turns and confidence to express opposing views. Indeed, Siti and Arfah challenged a traditional practice where they expressed disagreement to some of my statements. This is not a common practice in our cultural context. In short, the study confirmed that participatory action research encourages social transformations as the research team changed their roles from subordinate members to active participants.

The current study shows that the key to social transformations in the hierarchical setting was the building relationship efforts taken throughout the research project. In the first cycle, the students were reluctant to share their learning experiences due to the formal teacher-student relationship in Malaysian culture. Students were worried that, by giving suggestions, teachers would be offended, as teachers are often viewed as experts in the Malaysian context. To encourage the students to be active

participants in the planning of their learning, the research team employed efforts to minimize the gap that traditionally exists between teachers and students. In order to do this, we conducted more informal teacher-student conversations between our lessons. Specifically, we required the students to present formal reports on their progress of completing the second multiliteracies project. The teachers used the report to initiate discussion in small groups, where we addressed issues that the students had raised in their reports. The students were initially reserved and submissive in these sessions, but as the research project progressed data showed that the students became more confident to engage in discussions with the teachers.

Similarly, in encouraging the lecturers to move from subordinate research members to active participants, I made constant efforts to build good relationships among the research team in order to reduce the gap and power distance that was determined according to our positions in the hierarchical structure. To encourage active participation, as the initiator of the participatory action research and a person of higher position in the hierarchical structure, I was ready to share the control with the research team members who were at a lower position in the structure. I was open to the idea of receiving suggestions from the team members and I valued their opinions. In addition, I provided opportunities for the lecturers to express their ideas and opinions in a casual manner, and conducted informal interactions outside the classroom and professional discussions. As a result, the barrier between Arfah, Siti and me were reduced and they no longer considered me a person with authority and they realized that they could have a say in the decision-making process relating to teaching the multiliteracies unit.



## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the limitations of the study was that it was a small-scale study. It was conducted in one context, which was an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in one higher education institution in Malaysia. The focus was small as the data and findings were based on the experiences of 12 students and two lecturers. It was also a short term study as it was conducted within two cycles of action research within an eight week period. Even though the study was a small-scale study, the scope was sufficient in providing rich data regarding the students' experiences in learning using the multiliteracies approach. The findings of the study provided understandings about a specific context, but the findings could be used as a substantial basis for future researches.

Another limitation of the study was the small number of people in the participatory action research team, where only one researcher and two lecturers participated in the study. In studying a particular social context, participatory action research ideals suggest that all levels of the community be involved as co-researchers in one research team. This study did not involve all stakeholders in the learning contexts of Bakti Polytechnic such as the curriculum designers, administrators, and parents who could provide multiple as well as diverse perspectives on the issue based on their interest and roles in the community. In addition, the current study did not involve students as co-researchers. Students could have provided insider perspectives regarding their learning. However, the collaborative experience of the research team was substantial enough to provide basic guidelines to conduct a participatory action research in the context and could be used as a foundation for further research on participatory action research in Malaysia.

The study also discussed the cultural values of the Malay community, and did not address other ethnic groups' cultural values. Malaysia consists of three dominant ethnic groups with distinctive cultural values. By focusing the discussion on Malay cultural values and perspectives, this study did not represent the experiences of Malaysians as a whole. However, since almost all participants were from the Malay society, I think it was appropriate to use the Malay cultural values and practices to explain the findings of the study. In addition, one participant was from the Malaysian Chinese ethnic group and the study has addressed a small number of cultural attributes of the Chinese community. Although many studies (e.g Asma, 1996; Lim & Asma, 2001) showed that Malaysians do share some similar cultural characteristics such as face saving and hierarchical structure, it is inappropriate to classify all participants with similar culture as the Malay community.

Another limitation was that the study focussed on only the students' experiences of learning using the multiliteracies approach. The study did not explore the experiences and challenges, if any, of the teachers in implementing a Western-based pedagogy that stressed active participation, collaboration, and critical thinking in a learning context that has different cultural practices and interprets learning through different cultural values.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The Malaysian educational policy makers are highlighting the importance of producing Malaysian university graduates who are highly employable and possess 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills. I suggest that a contextualized multiliteracies approach

would be a suitable pedagogical approach in order to enhance learners' experiences and promote the learning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The findings of the study show that the contextualized multiliteracies approach promoted necessary skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as linking classroom learning to practical knowledge, communicating in the English language, critical thinking, and team work. These skills could be the basis of developing employability skills among the students.

This study showed that that by taking a pedagogical approach from the Western educational system without further investigation on how the students' socio-cultural attributes influence the way they learn could be challenging and detrimental for the students. Through understanding the students' socio-cultural perspectives and practices in learning, the research team was able to link their socio-cultural learning to the concepts of multiliteracies. In personalising the multiliteracies module, the research team employed the following steps and these steps might be useful for further attempts at implementing a multiliteracies approach in an examination-based learning context. In order to contextualize the multiliteracies module, we:

1. recognized the influences of cultural values and practices of the students in learning;
1. used the combination of print-based and multimodal resources in teaching;
2. linked classroom learning to practical knowledge to provide meaningful experience for the students;
3. included the element of adventure and exploration in learning;
4. incorporated prescriptive teaching as a bridge to using multiliteracies approach;
5. provided more teacher support through using building relationship efforts to minimize the formality of the teacher-student relationship.

In order to ensure the success of a participatory action research in a Malaysian setting, I realized that it was important to consider a few points prior to conducting the research project. It was important to acknowledge the presence and influences of status differences in the hierarchical structure in social, institutional and organizational settings in the Malaysian context. The research relationship in the research project could not be totally egalitarian or equal, but understanding the cultural attributes of the contexts helped me to devise practical action plans to minimize the gap between research team members based on their position in the social hierarchy. One of the action plans involved employing building relationship efforts, such as conducting frequent informal conversations in order to reduce the hierarchical gap. With all these points, I encouraged the research participants to transform their subordinating roles to active participants in a participatory action research project. These points could be useful as a foundation for negotiating Malaysian cultural implications in future participatory action research.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The current study provided data on how a Western-based pedagogy can be implemented in a Malaysian context based on the students' learning experiences. To get a better understanding of how a multiliteracies approach can be implemented in a Malaysian setting, an investigation on the Malaysian educators' experiences would be necessary. Data in the current study showed that the lecturers were not familiar with using multimodal resources in their teaching and that they tended to prioritize examination-based lessons. The findings of this study suggested that these practices were the underlying factors that caused the students' poor performances in

negotiating learning using the multiliteracies approach in the first cycle of the study, and this suggests that educators could face similar challenges. Future studies on Malaysian educators' experiences in implementing a multiliteracies approach might provide valuable insights into teachers' predicament between preparing students towards examination success, and using a multiliteracies approach to enhance students' learning experiences and acquiring 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills.

In addition, a longitudinal and large-scaled study would provide deeper insights into the issue of taking a Western-based pedagogy to a Malaysian examination-based learning context. A future study might involve a number of learning contexts from several higher education learning institutions in Malaysia, as a way of providing data about the use of a multiliteracies approach across multiple contexts.

A future study could also involve more action research cycles. The current study with two action research cycles provided rich data, but on a small scale. A longitudinal study with more action research cycles would provide better opportunities to improve the implementation of a multiliteracies approach in Malaysia due to the close connection of reflection and practical actions in participatory action research. This could provide guidelines to assist Malaysian educators in implementing the multiliteracies approach in their classrooms.

The current study investigated the experiences of a university researcher and two lecturers in conducting a participatory action research in a hierarchical context and it provided data that might be useful for establishing other participatory action research. A future study could involve all stakeholders in the education field such as

policy makers, administrators, researchers, teachers, parents and students in one research project. Such a study could provide diverse perspectives towards the issue of the implementation of a multiliteracies approach in Malaysian settings, as each group might have different perspectives and interests that would affect the direction and outcomes of the research project. Additionally, a bigger participatory action research group would provide a richer data in exploring the experiences of each research team members in interpreting and negotiating the ideals of participatory action research. It should shed light on the issue of the influences Malaysian cultural values and practices as well as social transformations in a participatory action research.

The current research could also be expanded to involve different ethnic groups in Malaysia, including the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Bumiputera (sons of soil). Investigating the research experiences of students and research team members from different ethnic groups in Malaysia would probably bring the study to a new level. This is where data will be diverse due to the distinctive cultural values and practices of each ethnic group. The study could explore how each ethnic group's distinctive cultural values and practices make sense of learning using a multiliteracies approach and conducting a participatory action research.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the implementation of a Western-based pedagogy, a multiliteracies approach, in a Malaysian context. The study showed that Malaysian students faced challenges in negotiating learning using a multiliteracies approach as

it is different from their examination-based learning experiences and challenges some cultural values and practices. This study showed that personalizing the multiliteracies approach to the students' learning cultures provided meaningful learning experiences for the students and fostered 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills and knowledge amongst the students.

This study also investigated the issues of conducting a Western-based research methodology, participatory action research, in a Malaysian hierarchical context. The study shows that, in a hierarchical setting, status differences among research team members were best acknowledged and could be minimized through building relationship efforts. In addition, the study showed that participatory action research empowered researchers to step away from their traditionally-determined roles in the hierarchical structure and become active participants who contributed to a transformed learning environment in their own social context. As has been demonstrated, this study has contributed original knowledge relevant to the field and to the methodology.

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**APPENDIX A: LESSON PLAN FOR CYCLE 1****MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 1****CAREER BLOG**

Subject	:	English Language
Topic	:	Career Research
Skills focus	:	Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking
Language content	:	Present Tense, Past Tense , Subject Verb agreement,
Asking questions		

Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

- Locate information and job specifications of a career of their choice through interview and online search.
- Present and disseminate information regarding their career research to the members of public using a technology/multimedia presentation.

Soft skills: (as determined by MOHE, 2006)

Communication skills, Teamwork, Computer skills

Learning Experiences Key

Situated Practice	Exposure to real-world texts and texts in students' lives
Overt instruction	talking about how texts work
Critical framing	Talking about what the texts are for
Transformed practice	making and using texts ( doing something with them), applying the new knowledge about texts

Learning sequence

Situated	Student form small focus groups, choosing two professions that they wish to study in depth.
Overt /Critical	Through a teacher-directed discussion, draw attention to important aspects of researching a profession such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the qualification needed for the profession?</li> <li>• What are the skills needed to excel in the job?</li> <li>• Where can we get the training/education?</li> <li>• What are the general job descriptions?</li> <li>• How does a day of the profession goes?</li> </ul>
Overt	Students begin by collecting a variety of articles from newspaper, magazine and online articles to analyze critically and generate general information regarding the professions.
Overt	Each focus group will interview two people in the profession to get detailed description and insights of the professions.
Critical	Each focus group constructs the theme, concept, focus and presentation styles of their career blog.
Transformed	Each focus group shares the result of their career research project with the members of the public. Students should:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- present their career blog to the class.</li><li>- discuss the challenges/ they faced in carrying out the assignment.</li><li>- discuss the reasons why they chose to describe the professions.</li><li>- discuss the reasons behind the theme, concept and presentation styles of their career blog.</li></ul>
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**MULTILITERACIES LESSON UNIT 1A****MEETING PEOPLE**

Subject	:	English Language
Duration	:	2 hours
Skills focus	:	Listening & Speaking
Language content	:	Salutation, asking questions, politeness

Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

- Use proper salutations and self- introductions when meeting people.
- Use politeness markers in their interaction with other people.
- Analyse appropriate language used in informal and formal settings.

Soft skills: (as determined by MOHE, 2006)

Communication skills, Teamwork, Computer skills

Learning Experiences: Key

Situated Practice	exposure to real-world texts and texts in students' lives
Overt instruction	talking about how texts work
Critical framing	Talking about what the texts are for
Transformed practice	making and using texts ( doing something with them), applying the new knowledge about texts

Learning sequence

Situated	<p>Teacher presents a provocation to the students by writing the words <i>salutation, asking question and politeness</i> on the board.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher asks the students what they understand from the words and write their responses on the board (mind map).</li> <li>• Teacher then asks the students some of the salutation and questions that they use when they are greeting people. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ E.g <i>You are making a phone call to one of your lecturers to make an appointment to see him or her to discuss one of your assignments.</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>A few students will be asked to volunteer to share their answers with the class.</p>
Overt	<p>Teacher asks the students whether it's important to know and use the right way/language when meeting people.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What could happen if they fail to greet people politely?</li> </ul> <p>In a teacher-directed discussion with the students, teacher and students brainstorm appropriate salutations and greetings that can be used when communicating with other people.</p>



Critical	<p>In small focus groups (4-5 members), students will be given a role- play card. Each group will be asked to create a role play based on the situation given.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Examples of situation:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ When you go to the market/ colleges/ polytechnics/ companies/ police station/ hospitals/ restaurants/ resorts, who are the people you usually see? Choose 4/5 people and role play how the characters would salute, greet, enquire (ask questions), clarify things and interrupt other people.</li></ul></li></ul> <p>Teacher reminds the students to use some of the inputs given previously. Teacher reminds them to use the appropriate words that display politeness in their role plays such as <i>thank you</i> and <i>please</i>.</p>
Critical	<p>Students present their role plays to the class. Other students evaluate the other groups' role play based on an evaluation form provided by the teacher.</p>

### **Situation 1**

You are an executive in ABC Engineering . You would like to talk to the General Manager of a reputable engineering company. You make a phone call to the office and his secretary picks up the phone. Introduce yourself and inform the secretary that you wish to see the General Manager within that week.

### **Situation 2**

You have a meeting in a building that you are not familiar with. Suddenly you see a middle-aged female cleaner sweeping the floor. Ask for direction to your meeting place. The meeting is at Bistari Conference room at 2pm.

### **Situation 3**

You have a question that you need to clarify with your lecturer urgently. You saw her having lunch in the canteen with a few friends. Approach her and ask the question.

### **Situation 4**

You are in a hurry to go for your final examination and you accidentally park your car in a staff parking zone. When you get out from the examination hall, you see a male security officer is issuing you with a parking summon. Try to settle the situation with the security guard.

### **Situation 5**

You are in a meeting. Your colleague Lim is presenting his ideas on how to promote a new product of your company. You disagree with what he is saying. Interrupt his presentation and state your mind.

**ROLE PLAY CHECKLIST**

Group	APPROPRIATE	NOT APPROPRIATE	CORRECTION (if any)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

**MULTILITERACIES LESSON UNIT 2A****ASKING QUESTIONS**

Subject : English Language  
 Skills focus : Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking  
 Language content : Asking questions : Wh-Q, Yes/No questions form

Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

- Ask questions using the appropriate question form

Teaching aids:

Soft skills: (as determined by MOHE, 2006)

Communication skills, Teamwork, Computer skills

Learning Experiences: Key

Situated Practice exposure to real-world texts and texts in students' lives  
 Overt instruction talking about how texts work  
 Critical framing Talking about what the texts are for  
 Transformed practice making and using texts ( doing something with them), applying the new knowledge about texts

Learning sequence

Overt	In a teacher directed discussion, discuss the methods of asking questions. Highlight the forms of questioning such as Yes/No questions and Wh-questions
Situated	In pairs, students do a few practices in forming questions.
Critical	In small focus groups, students plan and devise questions for their career interview.
Critical	Students share their questions with the class. Other students are encouraged to give feedback to improve the questions.
Overt	Teacher provides feedback on the overall presentation.

**MULTILITERACIES LESSON UNIT 2B****SOCIAL NETWORKING**

Subject	:	English Language
Duration	:	2 hours
Skills focus	:	Listening and Speaking
Language content	:	Present tense

Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

- Identify several social networking methods in the past and present.
- Explain the pros and cons of creating social networking
- Identify several ways in making self – introductions.
- Use appropriate language and communication skills in formal and informal settings.
- Analyze issues of politeness in meeting new people.

Teaching aids: Computer, Internet, Print article

Soft skills: (as determined by MOHE, 2006)

Communication skills, Teamwork, Computer skills

Learning Experiences: Key

Situated Practice	exposure to real-world texts and texts in students' lives
Overt instruction	talking about how texts work
Critical framing	Talking about what the texts are for
Transformed practice	making and using texts ( doing something with them), applying the new knowledge about texts

Learning sequence:

Situated & Overt	<p>Teacher presents a provocation to students regarding social networking. E.g:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think about penpalling?</li> <li>• What are the methods of social networking in the present times?</li> </ul> <p>Teacher shows a video from YouTube as provocation. <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV4PNwpgsCc">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV4PNwpgsCc</a></p> <p>Teacher and students discuss the content of the video.</p>
Critical	<p>Teacher shows a few logos to the students ( Facebook, YouTube, Blogger, Friendster, Twitter, Skype, Yahoo Messenger).</p> <p>In small focus groups, students choose two social network websites and analyze the websites. Students identify the interesting features, and the pros and cons of the website.</p>
Critical	<p>Students share their discussion results with the class. Other students are encouraged to give feedback.</p>

Transformed	Teacher asks the students to think of effective ways of presenting their career blog based on the discussions earlier. Students plans the features of their career blog.
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## APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTION OF THE MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 2

### MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 2: MINI RESEARCH- YOUR OWN MAJALAH 3

#### Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

- Conduct a mini research on an issue in their community.
- Synthesize and analyse information obtained from a variety of channels such as newspaper, magazines and online articles.
- Present their research finding in a documentary and a multimedia presentation.
- Disseminate information regarding their research to the public through a documentary.

**Soft skills:** (as determined by Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2006)

- i. Communicative skills.
- ii. Thinking skills and Problem solving skills.
- iii. Team work force
- iv. Life-long learning and Information Management

#### Assignment

In a small group (3-4 people), carry out a mini research on an issue in your community ( e.g students' life, polytechnic environment, Port Dickson environment). Each group should have 2 boys and 2 girls.

The **MAXIMUM NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN EACH GROUP IS 4.**

- Choose 1 issue or problem in your community to study. Pay extra attention to details such as:
  - What is the issue? (e.g the issue of ATM machines in Polytechnic campus, the issue of pollution on PD beaches, social issues in polytechnic, academic issues such as the culture of plagiarism among students, learning environment of polytechnic campus)
  - What problems or difficulties that you are facing due to the issue?
  - What are the possible causes of the problem?
  - What are the opinions of your community members?
  - How can the issue be solved? (provide a few solutions).
- Get information on the issue in two ways:
  - collect a variety of articles from newspaper, magazine and online articles to analyse critically and generate general information. PLEASE ANALYSE THE ARTICLES CRITICALLY AND AVOID PLAGIARISM.

- E.g If you are researching the ATM machine problems in polytechnic campus, you might want to find information on how many ATM machines in other polytechnics, universities, how many ATM machines is considered sufficient in one place).
- E.g If you are researching the cleanliness level in PD beaches, then you can find information on the cleanliness level in other beaches and how the cleanliness contributes to the development of that community.
- Create a SURVEY and INTERVIEW a few people in your community to get their opinion regarding the issue. You can include the interview and the result of the survey in your documentary.
  - You can get participation from 3-4 of your friends in campus or PD community or polytechnic lecturers and staff (all interviews must be conducted in English).

### **Presentation**

Each group should share the result of your mini research in the form of a DOCUMENTARY or similar to Majalah 3. You can record your documentary using your handphones or digital camera or video cam. The duration of each documentary is **10 to 15 minutes only**.

#### **Divide task among group members equally:**

- Decide who is going to be the host/ hosts of the show.
- Decide the concept of your documentary – e.g fun, formal, semi formal, funky, etc. You can do this by analysing existing programs on television such as Majalah 3, Aduan Rakyat, Kontroversi etc.
- Learn how to record using hand phones and how to download the recording to the computer. You can use Movie Maker software or any other software.
- Set the questions for your survey and interviews.

**PRESENTATION DATE: 19 JANUARY 2011**

**PRESENTATION VENUE: COMPUTER LAB**

### **Assesment (20%)**

Students will be assessed based on the following criteria

1. Presentation skills ( 10%)
  - a. Visual aids.
  - b. Non verbal skills
    - i. Eye contact
    - ii. Gestures
    - iii. Confidence
    - iv. Good voice projection



2. Content and language (10%)
  - a. Research depth
  - b. Presents and elaborates points clearly with relevant examples
  - c. The contents are well organized
  - d. Has good introduction and conclusion.
  - e. Use of grammatical sentences to explain points and ideas.

### **Progress report**

All groups will be required to report their progress of the assignment **weekly**. The progress report should be submitted to the lecturers via email or Facebook (Malaysian Multiliteracies Group). These progress reports are to ensure that the lecturers would be able to give feedback and consultation from time to time.

Due date for progress reports:

1. 2 January 2011
2. 9 January 2011
3. 16 January 2011

~GOOD LUCK~

**APPENDIX C: LESSON PLAN FOR CYCLE 2****MULTILITERACIES PROJECT 2****DOCUMENTARY: CREATING YOUR OWN MAJALAH 3**

Subject	:	English Language
Level	:	Intermediate and Advanced
Topic	:	Documentary: Creating Your Own <i>Majalah 3</i>
Skills focus	:	Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking
Language content	:	Reporting speech

Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

- Identify issues that are important in their own community
- Conduct a research project to investigate issues in an in-depth manner
- Analyse and discuss the issue in a form of a documentary

Teaching aids:

Soft skills: (as determined by MOHE, 2006)

Communication skills, Teamwork, Computer skills

Learning Experiences: Key

Situated Practice	exposure to real-world texts and texts in students' lives
Overt instruction	talking about how texts work
Critical framing	Talking about what the texts are for
Transformed practice	making and using texts ( doing something with them), applying the new knowledge about texts

Learning sequence

Critical	Students form small focus groups and identify issues in their community.
Overt	Through a teacher-directed discussion, draw attention to how to research an issue based on past activity in Unit 6.
Critical	Each focus group discuss and decide how to present their issue in a 10-minute visual documentary (using hand-phones or digital camera).
Situated	Each focus group reads and understands the concepts of editing a movie using Movie Maker.
Overt	Through a teacher-directed discussion, draw attention to techniques in a movie e.g camera angles, music, wordings as anchorage.
Transformed	Each focus group shares their documentary <i>Majalah 3 with the whole class</i> . Students and teachers provide feedback based on the documentary.

**MULTILITERACIES LESSON UNIT 3A****INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

Subject : English Language  
 Duration : 2 hour  
 Skills focus : Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking  
 Language content :

Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

1. Analyze an issue critically;
2. To practice analyzing, evaluating and synthesizing

Teaching aids: Computer, Internet, Handout

Soft skills: (as determined by MOHE, 2006)

Communication skills, Teamwork, Computer skills

Learning Experiences: Key

Situated Practice exposure to real-world texts and texts in students' lives  
 Overt instruction talking about how texts work  
 Critical framing Talking about what the texts are for  
 Transformed practice making and using texts ( doing something with them), applying the new knowledge about texts

Learning sequence

Situated	Students read a text by Amy Tan (1987) entitled "Fish Cheeks"
Overt	Students answer a few comprehension questions regarding the article
Situated	Students watch a video clip from the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding (Zwick, 2001)
Overt	Students answer a few comprehension questions regarding the movie clip.
Critical	Students, in small focus groups, discuss the following questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. What are the issues presented in both article and movie clip?</li> <li>ii. What do you learn from both sources? What is your stand in this matter?</li> <li>iii. Do the issues apparent in your society?</li> <li>iv. Do you think that knowledge on intercultural communication is important to you?</li> </ol>
Transformed practice	In small group, try to locate two articles on intercultural communication using the internet to answer the following questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are important aspects in intercultural communication?</li> <li>2. How important is the knowledge of intercultural communication?</li> </ol>
Critical	Student share their work with the class. Teacher and other students provide feedback.

**MULTILITERACIES LESSON UNIT 3B****MINI RESEARCH**

Subject	:	English Language
Duration	:	4 hours
Level	:	Intermediate and Advanced
Topic	:	Conducting a mini research project: Mobile phones use among students in Class A
Skills focus	:	Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking

Intended Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to :

- Analyze an issue critically
- Create a simple survey and interview questions
- Analyze data collected through a mini-research project
- Practice synthesizing information through several sources
- Avoid plagiarism through using their own words.

Teaching aids: Computer, Internet, Handout

Soft skills: (as determined by MOHE, 2006)

Communication skills, Teamwork, Computer skills

Learning Experiences: Key

Situated Practice	exposure to real-world texts and texts in students' lives
Overt instruction	talking about how texts work
Critical framing	Talking about what the texts are for
Transformed practice	making and using texts ( doing something with them), applying the new knowledge about texts

Learning sequence

Situated	Student read a few articles regarding the use of handphones. Teacher asks the students to find a few more article online on the same topic.
Critical	Students write a simple report on the information that they gather on the topic.
Overt instruction	Teacher teach the concept of conducting a mini research project including identifying a topic, searching background information, collecting data and analyzing data.
Critical	Students, in small groups, choose one of the suggested topic and conduct a mini-research project. The topics are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The importance of mobile phones to teenagers today.( In what ways?)</li> <li>2. The most popular mobile phone brands and the reasons for the popularity.</li> </ol>

	<p>3. The most popular function in a mobile phone among teenagers and the reasons why.</p> <p>4. Other alternatives for communication with others. (If there were no mobile phones, what form of message/contact would you choose to communicate with others? Why?)</p> <p>5. The future of mobile phones and the additional features teenagers would like to have in a mobile phone and the reasons why.</p> <p>6. Life without mobile phones, is it possible? (How to cope with life without mobile phones?)</p> <p>Students create 5-6 survey or interview questions. Students distribute questionnaires to classmates.</p>
Critical	<p>Students analyze data and present their findings to the class. Teachers and students discuss their findings.</p>
Transformed	<p>Students discuss and set up questions for the second multiliteracies project.</p>

**CONDUCT A MINI SURVEY IN YOUR CLASSROOM.  
WORK IN A GROUP OF 4-5PEOPLE.**

**Step 1:Each group will have to choose 1 topic below to research on.**

7. The importance of mobile phones to teenagers today.( In what ways?)
8. The most popular mobile phone brands and the reasons for the popularity.
9. The most popular function in a mobile phone among teenagers and the reasons why.
10. Other alternatives for communication with others. (If there were no mobile phones, what form of message/contact would you choose to communicate with others? Why?)
11. The future of mobile phones and the additional features teenagers would like to have in a mobile phone and the reasons why.
12. Life without mobile phones, is it possible? (How to cope with life without mobile phones?)

**Step 2:Create around 5 -6 survey and interview questions to find answers to your topic of your research.**

You could ask your friends to fill in the survey or you could conduct a verbal interview among your friends.

**Step 3: Let your classmate answer the survey and interview questions.**

**Step 4: Collect your data and start analysing your data.**

**Step 5: Present your data to the class.**

**COLLECTING AND ANALYSING DATA.**

Sarimah has to prepare for a public speaking speech in front of her class next week. She would like to create awareness among her friends regarding the dangers of dengue fever. She wants to carry out a survey to find out how much knowledge her classmates have regarding this topic. She has a few options :

Multiple choice questions.

1. How much do you know about the causes of dengue fever?
  - a. A lot.
  - b. Moderate
  - c. Not much
  - d. Don't know anything

Yes/No question

2. Do you know that aedes larvae can survive in clean waters?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

Open ended questions

3. What have you done as an individual in supporting the effort of the government to fight aedes ?
- 
- 

Help her to create another three questions.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

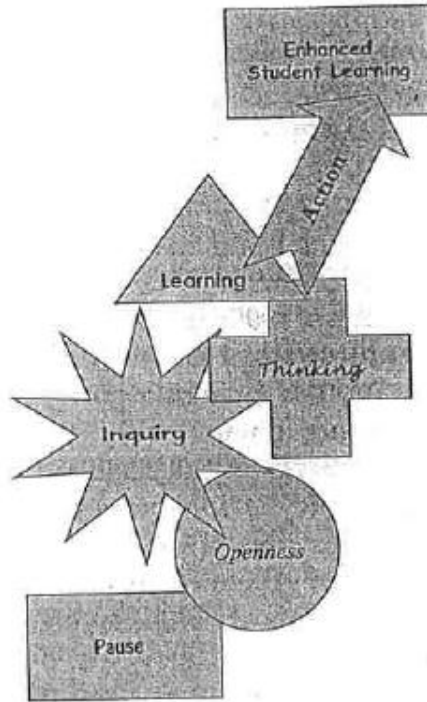
### **DATA ANALYSIS**

She hands out the survey to her classmates and this is the result of the survey. Help her to analyze the data by turning the figures to percentages.

1. Question 1
  - a. 8/30 students answered A.
  - b. 10/30 students answered B.
  - c. 7/30 students answered C.
  - d. 5/30 students answered D.
2. Question 2
  - a. 9/30 answered A
  - b. 21/30 answered B
3. Question 3
  - a. 5/30 claimed that they have joined community gotong royong.
  - b. 1/30 claimed that she helped to distribute flyers.
  - c. 2/30 claimed that they have joined an essay writing competition regarding dengue fever in schools.
  - d. 7 students claimed that they helped their parents in ensuring that there are no available spots in their homes for aedes to breed.
  - e. 15 students claimed that they had done nothing.

**APPENDIX D:  
YORK- BARR ET AL.'S (2006) REFLECTIVE PRACTICE MODEL**

Figure 1.1 Theory of Action for Reflective Practice



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## MACFARLANE ET AL.'S (2006) FOUR-STEP MODEL IN DEVELOPING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE SKILLS

### Teaching critically reflective practice

Reflective practice is a useful starting point for change if certain strategies are present. Post-structural thinking is useful here and gives rise to critical reflection by the practitioner. As such thinking promotes the notion of multiple perspectives, then these components are less likely to delimit notions of practice as 'proper' or 'improper'. Thus, reflective practice can be understood and improved by the use of a four-step model that includes the following stages – deconstruct, confront, theorise, think otherwise. This model is briefly explained below:

- i. To **deconstruct** teaching practice is to pull apart the main tenets of theory that govern particular practices and closely examine its make up, especially practices that have been enshrined as 'normal' and 'proper' practice.
- ii. To **confront** educational issues translates as approaching the issues head on by examining difficult, previously thought of as 'untouchable' topics.
- iii. To theorise is to carefully consider teaching practice at all levels and question what is and what could be by thinking broadly and by using a range of discourses from which to draw.
- iv. To **think otherwise** is to challenge oneself to think outside the dominant discursive framework and come up with other ways, or better ways of thinking about and practising teaching (teaching and learning).

## APPENDIX E: TEACHERS' CONSENT FORM

### TEACHER'S INFORMATION SHEET

**Research Project Title:**

Developing a Multiliteracies Framework in a Malaysian University: A Participatory Action Research Project

**Researcher:**

Fariza Puteh Behak

Faculty of Education  
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Phone: 0401614632 Email: [farizapb@usq.edu.au](mailto:farizapb@usq.edu.au)

**Dear Participants,**

I am writing to you to invite you to participate in a research project. The research project details are as follows:

**The project:**

This study will introduce a multiple literacies approach in ESL classrooms in order to better prepare the students for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study will investigate how the multiliteracies approach influences the students' English language learning. Second, it aims to examine how the English language teachers' experiences in participating in a research project as co-researchers contribute to their professional development.

**Participation:**

The participation in this action research project is voluntary. I am inviting you to be part of this research project as co-researchers where we will work collaboratively to develop a new learning module that uses the multiliteracies approach. We will take

into account related literatures on multiliteracies pedagogy, your teaching experiences, students' cultural backgrounds and institutional requirements. We will also be collaborative partners to explore the students' language learning experiences in a multiliteracies classroom. This could be achieved through classroom observations and a series of professional discussion throughout the action research process. During the course of the research project, a few one-to-one interviews will be carried out to obtain personal insights regarding your participation in the research project. In addition, all classroom learning processes, professional discussions and interviews may be audio and video recorded.

**Learning Outcomes:**

Many benefits can be gained by joining this research project. The benefits are:

- the opportunity to reflect on your own teaching and learning processes.
- the opportunity to study the issues in your own community and provide practical solutions through research.
- the enhancement of practitioner's research skill; a skill that is beneficial to your professional development.

**Risks:**

The progression of your work will not be disrupted as most research process is parallel to your present work requirement.

**Confidentiality:**

You will remain anonymous in the research dissertation or future publications based on this research project. The interview recordings and transcript will be stored securely in a locked cabinet.

**Questions/further information:**

If you have any questions or require more information pertaining the research project please contact the researcher through the details given at the cover page.

**Concerns/complaints:**

Should you have any concern about the conduct of this research project, please contact;

**USQ Ethics Officer, Office of Research & Higher Degree, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba QLD 4350, Australia or telephone +61 7 4631 2690 or email [ethics@usq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@usq.edu.au)**

## TEACHER'S INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Research Project Title:

Developing a Multiliteracies Framework in a Malaysian University: A Participatory Action Research Project

### Researcher:

Fariza Puteh Behak

Faculty of Education  
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Phone: 0401614632 Email: [farizapb@usq.edu.au](mailto:farizapb@usq.edu.au)

### Statement of Consent:

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- have read and understood the information sheet about this research project;
- have had any additional questions answered to your satisfaction;
- understand that you can contact the researcher if you have any concerns or questions;
- understand that you are free to withdraw from the research project at any time, without comment or penalty, and without any negative impact on your professional development;
- understand that classroom activities, reflective discussions and interviews regarding the research project will be audio and/or video recorded;
- understand that, if you have a concern regarding the implementation of the project, you should contact USQ Ethics Officer, Office of Research & Higher Degree, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba QLD 4350, Australia or telephone +61 7 4631 2690 or email [ethics@usq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@usq.edu.au)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX F: STUDENTS' CONSENT FORM**

### **STUDENT'S INFORMATION SHEET**

**Research Project Title:**

Developing a Multiliteracies Framework in a Malaysian University: A Participatory Action Research Project

**Researcher:**

Fariza Puteh Behak

Faculty of Education  
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Phone: 0401614632 Email: [farizapb@usq.edu.au](mailto:farizapb@usq.edu.au)

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**The project:**

This study will introduce a multiple literacies approach in ESL classrooms in order to better prepare the students for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study will investigate how the multi literacies approach influences the students' English language learning. Second, it aims to examine how the English language teachers' experiences in participating in a research project as co researchers contribute to their professional development.

**Your participation:**

Your participation will be on voluntary basis. I am inviting you to be part of this research project as where we will work together to explore your language learning experiences in an English classroom that employs a pedagogy that focuses the new

literacies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You will provide reflections and suggestions regarding the English language lesson and assignment in the researcher's blog and Facebook group discussion. In addition, all classroom learning and interview sessions may be audio and video recorded.

**Learning Outcomes:**

You will gain many benefits by joining this research project.

- You will have the opportunity to reflect on your own learning processes.
- You will have the chance to participate actively in developing a curriculum for your own learning.
- You will enhance your research skill; a skill that is beneficial for your academic development.

**Risks:**

This study will have minimal risks to your language learning progress as the new learning module has been negotiated with your own class teacher.

**Confidentiality:**

You will remain anonymous in the research dissertation or any publications based on this research project.

**Questions/further information:**

You can contact me if you have any questions or require more information pertaining the research project or your language learning matters.

**Concerns/complaints:**

Should you have any concern about the conduct of this research project, please contact;

**USQ Ethics Officer, Office of Research & Higher Degree, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba QLD 4350, Australia or telephone +61 7 4631 2690 or email [ethics@usq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@usq.edu.au)**

## STUDENT'S INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Research Project Title:

Developing a Multiliteracies Framework in a Malaysian University: A Participatory Action Research Project

### Researcher:

Fariza Puteh Behak

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Phone: 0401614632 Email: [farizapb@usq.edu.au](mailto:farizapb@usq.edu.au)

### Statement of Consent:

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- have read and understood the information sheet about this research project;
- have had any additional questions answered to your satisfaction;
- understand that you can contact the researcher if you have any concerns or questions;
- understand that you are free to withdraw from the research project at any time, without comment or penalty, and without any negative impact on your course of study;
- understand that classroom activities, reflective discussions and interviews regarding the research project will be audio and/or video recorded;
- understand that, if you have a concern regarding the implementation of the project, you should contact USQ Ethics Officer, Office of Research & Higher Degree, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba QLD 4350, Australia or telephone +61 7 4631 2690 or email [ethics@usq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@usq.edu.au)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_