

WRITING ENGLISH ESSAYS WITHIN DOMINANT DISCOURSES IN MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS*

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Abstract: Writing is one of the four English language skills taught and tested in the education system in Malaysia. At the upper secondary school level, students write a variety of text types, most of which conform to examination genres. Given a learning context that is examination-driven and teacher-centred, and a writing curriculum that is non-negotiable, how do students accomplish their writing tasks? Embedding the classroom in an institutional and a larger sociocultural context, this paper demonstrates how some students responded to teacher instructions such as "Read, understand, interpret, do" and "Strictly no discussion please." Data were taken from student interviews, teacher interviews, students' written products and classroom observations of writing lessons over the second half of the school year. Findings from the study show the students' compliance with their teacher's expectations and writing requirements for school and examination purposes. It was a strategy to "get it done" but within school sanctions. In out-of-school contexts, students were engaged in other contrasting types of writing in English which served other social purposes.

Abstrak: Menulis atau mengarang ialah satu daripada empat kemahiran bahasa Inggeris yang diajar dan diuji dalam sistem pendidikan di Malaysia. Pada peringkat menengah atas, pelajar menulis pelbagai jenis teks, kebanyakannya mengikut keperluan peperiksaan. Dalam suatu konteks pembelajaran yang berpandukan peperiksaan dan berpusatkan guru serta suatu kurikulum menulis yang mesti diikuti, bagaimanakah pelajar menyempurnakan tugas menulis mereka? Dengan meletakkan bilik darjah dalam satu konteks institusi dan sosiobudaya yang lebih besar, kertas kerja ini menunjukkan bagaimana pelajar memberi respons kepada instruksi guru seperti "Baca, faham, buat interpretasi dan menulis" dan "Perbincangan tidak dibenarkan". Data dikumpul daripada temu ramah dengan pelajar dan guru mereka, hasil penulisan pelajar dan pemerhatian kelas menulis pada bahagian kedua kalendar sekolah. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar memenuhi jangkaan guru dan keperluan sekolah serta peperiksaan. Strategi mereka ialah dengan menghabiskan kerja mereka mengikut kehendak sekolah. Dalam konteks di luar sekolah pelajar didapati menulis jenis penulisan yang berbeza dan yang memenuhi tujuan sosial yang lain.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysian adolescents, especially those living in urban areas, engage in various forms of writing in English that include the school essay, SMS (short message service) texting, online chat, notes and poems. Formal school writing differs from personal writing with regard to form, content and purpose. The adolescents switch routinely between these diverse forms, pointing to the importance and place of writing in their lives. Their engagement in writing, whether formal or informal, is a subject of study for those interested in English literacy education in Malaysia.

This paper presents part of a larger qualitative study on the in-school and out-of-school writing by a class of Form 4 students in an urban school in Malaysia. The focus here is on students' writing output in relation to the teacher's classroom instruction discourse. The theoretical perspective which views classroom events as social discursive practices is discussed in the first section of the paper. The second section gives the contextual background which highlights the dominant discourses relating to English language use and examinations in Malaysian society. This is followed by a brief description of the study. The fourth section presents data on the students' pragmatic approaches to school writing. The concluding section reiterates the key themes of the study and suggests implications arising from the findings for the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Drawing on her observations of pedagogic practices, along with writing teachers' beliefs and theories of language and literacy, Ivanic (2004) proposes a framework for analyzing beliefs about the teaching and learning of writing across a wide range of settings. Using Gee's (1996: 127) understanding of discourses as "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes", Ivanic's (2004: 224) framework includes six distinct discourses or "constellations of beliefs". They are a skills discourse, a creativity discourse, a process discourse, a genre discourse, a social practices discourse and a sociopolitical discourse. In the social practices discourse, Ivanic (2004: 234) says:

Writing is purpose-driven communication in a social context. Writing is conceptualized as a part of "literacy" more broadly conceived as a set of social practices: patterns of participation, gender preferences, networks of support and collaboration, patterns of use of time, space,

tools, technology and resources, the interaction of writing with reading and of written language with other semiotic modes, the symbolic meanings of literacy, and the broader social goals which literacy serves in the lives of people and institutions.

The study presented here shares this view of embedding writing in a larger sociocultural context. The student participants' engagement with school writing is considered a literacy event (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and a specific instance of language use in relation to a wider sociocultural context (Lillis, 2001). To view literacy as a social practice shifts the focus from the individual's mastery of neutral technical linguistic skills to how he/she makes meaningful use of literacy in relation to a group of people. Analyses of written texts with a sociocultural approach foreground the writer as socially situated in the practised act of meaning-making. A social practices discourse of writing, as defined by Ivanic (2004), values not only the finished product of writing but also the ways of "being and doing" accomplished in the act of writing. These ways are culturally shaped, normalised and repeated, largely invisible to the insider of a group. In this act of writing, the values and beliefs of a social group are represented as part of the identity of the writer (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Kress (1989), Fairclough (1992) and Luke (1995/1996) also share this concept of discourses as ideological, multiple and interconnected through social identities and practices.

This study situated the writers and their texts written for school within the immediate classroom context where writing was taught and learned, and within the larger context of culture (Fairclough, 1992). Across these two contexts were a range of discourses that influenced writing practices in school. This is also the case for a number of studies on classroom literacy practices (Moje, 1996; Oates, 2001; Moje, Willes, & Fassio, 2001; McKay & Wong, 1996). In the Malaysian context, there are two overlapping dominant discourses worth looking at: the discourse of examinations and the discourse of English as a second language. While there are conflicting views within these two discourses, the strands described later were particularly useful for this study.

The Discourse of Examinations

Malaysians treat examinations very seriously with teachers paying closer attention to classes taking public examinations and training students to be *celik ujian* (test wise). This is further supported by the many examination revision books published, and the seminars and holiday camps that teach students examination techniques as well as how to analyse past questions and improve memory skills. Private tuition centres are all predicated on tests and examinations, on which these businesses depend. Most parents are very selective

in their choice of schools and tuition centres, preferring to go where there is a record of excellent results. Such trends are particularly noticeable in the urban areas and developed states in Malaysia.

As an indication of Malaysian examination fever, a typical news reporting of nationwide standardized examination results ran as follows. Of the 471,697 candidates who sat for the 2002 Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) (Primary School Achievement Test), 22,472 scored full distinctions (Indramalar, 2002a). Of the 391,431 candidates who sat for the 2002 Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) (Lower Secondary Assessment), 17,994 (4.6%) obtained straight As (Indramalar, 2002b). Thus, the media which highlight the excellent performance of both individuals and institutions also contribute to this discourse.

Therefore, most Malaysian students experience school as examinations or practice for examinations, rather than as a broad education. This is further reinforced by the practice of many teachers who operate from a positivist standpoint on knowledge and learning. The teacher is the authority, transmitting truths that are unproblematic in a one-way flow of information to their students. It is not uncommon to find in the classroom the use of drills, rote learning, memorizing of model answers and homework. An online news article entitled "Homework a waste of time, say Aussie principals" ("Homework," 2004) reported that Malaysian students spent 3.8 hours a day on average doing their homework. This figure was higher than in Singapore (3.5 hours) and Australia (2.2 hours).

Sufean Hussin (1998) describes Malaysian students as having "diffusive" and "passive" mental modes. People with a diffusive mental mode tend to say *tidak apa* (never mind or it doesn't matter) when things do not go as planned. Some believe that fate more than personal will and responsibility determines their destiny in life. Being passive is reflected in the quiet manner in which students pay attention in class. Even when there is a legitimate point to be made or question to be asked, students mostly choose to remain silent. Students seldom confront their teachers and are reluctant to voice their opinions probably to avoid humiliation and conflict. They generally respond in predictable ways rather than be critical. Koo (2004) claims that many Malaysian students have the practice of "submissive literacy" rather than "assertive literacy". As the term suggests, submissive literacy tends not to question information received or its sources. On the other hand assertive literacy is a practice where the participant "exercises some responsibility for the origin of ideas in the source of text and comments upon it or has some reasoned commitment to or detachment from the source text" (Koo, 2004: 77).

The participants of the present study also operated within this discourse. We can see this in how they coped with examination requirements in the data section.

The Discourse of English as a Second Language

Unlike the usual understanding of the notion of "English as a second language" in countries like Australia or the United States (US), English as a second language (ESL) in Malaysia means English is second in importance to bahasa Melayu (Asmah, 1995; Thiyaga Rajah, 1990). Malaysia is not an English-speaking country. As such Malaysia does not have the supportive English-speaking environment that countries like Australia and the US have for their ESL learners. In addition, English is second to bahasa Melayu, which means it is taught as a compulsory second language in government schools. In the school timetable, English appears as a single subject. However, recent changes have increased students' exposure to the language by using English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics. This has been implemented in stages since 2003.

English is one of the languages used by Malaysians who mainly come from three major ethnic groups. English, like the languages of bahasa Melayu, Mandarin and Tamil, has to defend its position in mainstream education. Emphasis is given to bahasa Melayu, the national language (Ozog, 1993). The position of Mandarin and Tamil is equally secure, as they are vernacular languages protected by the country's constitution. Mandarin is also fast emerging as a world language, increasing in importance and demand in the Malaysian education system. Despite the clamour to protect each group's rights, many Malaysians see value in learning English, which for them opens the door to a secure future. They find the lack of good English is problematic in a globalised world where English is the international lingua franca.

Part of the discourse around English in Malaysia also concerns which standard of English is invoked in any setting. Some are proud of the local flavour while some prefer a native-speaker model, for example, British or American English. There is a general feeling that the local variety is inferior to the English used in English speaking countries. Malaysians are aware that they do not speak the "Queen's English", but one of the many emerging world Englishes. Malaysian English or *manglish* as some call it, is accepted as the norm. Lee (1998) has done a compilation of *manglish* terms that show the influence of vernacular languages on English. The expression *-lah* is but one of the many colourful expressions used and enjoyed by Malaysians. Lee feels that Malaysians who have a command of English often know how to speak "proper English" but use *manglish* to connect with fellow Malaysians. To speak *manglish* is to be uniquely Malaysian. In everyday communication, Malaysians are "shameless owners" of English (Sifakis & Sougari, 2003) and differentiated from native speaker groups.

To sum up this section, as in most South-East Asian countries with a colonial past, English in Malaysia carries a historical, social and political meaning. As Pennycook (1994: 34) puts it:

To use English implies relationships to local conditions of social and economic prestige, to certain forms of culture and knowledge, and also to global relations of capitalism and particular global discourses of democracy, economics, the environment, popular culture, modernity, development, education and so on.

In the present study, the participants' perceptions of school writing in English displayed an awareness of Pennycook's argument. How good they felt they were in English and how much they should work at improving their proficiency are discussed in the section on "Good enough for Malaysian English".

THE STUDY

This article is part of a larger qualitative study. The participants were students from a Form 4 class, collectively known as 4 Science 1, and Mr. Chen, their English teacher, who had at least 15 years of teaching experience. All participants have been given pseudonyms. Eight of the students in this class obtained 7As (straight As) in the PMR examination. With the exception of one student, all obtained an A for English language. The class of 4 Science 1 was the strongest academic class in Form 4.

Methodology

Data for this article were taken from formal observations of the writing lessons (see Appendix A for observation protocol), students' essays, field notes, student interviews (see Appendix B for interview questions) and informal discussions with the teacher. These discussions were unplanned and focused on issues that needed clarification. For example, there was a need to hear the teacher's views on why many participants were not concerned about their grammatical mistakes in their essays. Eleven writing lessons of 70 minutes each were observed, audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. The researcher's role was that of a participant observer (Spradley, 1980).

Data analysis was two-tiered. The first level of analysis was guided by the principles of grounded theory as well as the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The second level of analysis involved using the principles and tools of discourse analysis (Gee, 1996; Gee & Green, 1998) and critical discourse analysis (Luke,

1995/1996) to further interpret the data. The steps below explain this stage in greater detail.

Both student interviews and discussions with the teacher were audio-taped and transcribed. Student interview data were organized systematically into a spreadsheet. The table was planned horizontally according to the questions in the interviews and vertically with each student's name in each grid of the column. Displaying all the interview input in this way allowed a quick comparison (and contrast) not only between participants but also across questions. The data were read many times to identify emerging trends, as indicated by recurring issues or themes brought up by the participants. Frequently mentioned words like "marks" and "difficult" signalled categories of shared perceptions.

Data from the students were triangulated with data from the teacher which were organized in the following way. From multiple readings of the transcripts of Mr. Chen's classroom instruction discourse and discussions with the researcher, relevant and interesting data were extracted and put into a table which had three columns, namely "lesson/discussion date", "transcript" and "commentary". The first column helped to locate the data source while the transcript column contained portions of the actual discourse. The commentary column contained the researcher's own thoughts, notes and comments on the data. It included queries and links to data from other sources.

Moving back and forth between mainly the spreadsheets, students' essays, teacher's data and classroom observation data, eight interrelated domains of the students' perceptions and six interrelated domains of the teacher's perceptions of doing school writing were developed. The development of these categories was also guided by the domain analysis in Rex (1994) which looked at the metaphors used by the writing teacher and his students to talk about composing in a twelfth grade writing class.

For the purpose of this paper, three categories of students' perceptions of school writing are included for discussion.

STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO SCHOOL WRITING

The following sections highlight three ways this group of students handled writing tasks as a result of their perceptions of doing writing in school. Their voices are presented below without alteration. The students' approaches are discussed under the headings of "meeting evaluation criteria", "good enough for Malaysian English", and "self-censorship".

Meeting Evaluation Criteria

Students knew that school essays were judged against a set of criteria, including grammar, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, content, length, style and organization in their essays. They could see their teacher's red markings to indicate some of these errors. They had also been frequently reminded to check for errors in spelling and grammar before submitting their work.

The comments below show the students were mindful that each of the criteria of content, grammar, vocabulary and length contributed in varying degrees to the overall performance.

1. On content:

If you have the main point there, then you get more marks. (Eddie, Interview 1, 30 June 2003)

2. On grammar:

I think if grammar is wrong, it will pull down our marks. (Anselm, Interview 1, 9 July 2003)

3. On vocabulary:

Because I think they get more marks from that. You use the normal words, not interesting. (Seng Chi, Interview 1, 23 July 2003)

4. On length:

I won't write too much and I won't write too little... From my teacher, he said that he will cut marks. (Eddie, Interview 1, 30 June 2003)

Students also tried to weigh the criteria against each other. Hai Li and Sumathi had different strengths and they could see how to capitalize on their strengths to score better marks.

...grammar you use it a lot and er if you have many wrong grammars you lose a lot of marks. If you have a little bit of ideas, at least your grammar can save you. (Hai Li, Interview 1, 1 July 2003)

If we got a lot of grammar mistakes. Then our content will pull us up for the marks. (Sumathi, Interview 2, 26 August 2003)

Hai Li's strength was in her grammar. Her confidence was in the fact that grammar was allocated some marks in the grading scheme. Therefore even if content is lacking, "at least your grammar can save you". Sumathi, on the other hand, could not depend on grammar but on her creative ability to expand on ideas. Her essays were very much longer, sometimes far exceeding the required length of 350 words. It shows her belief that she could compensate for poor grammar with excellent content in a marking scheme that considered both criteria. And to meet the length requirement, Eva resorted to exploiting one small idea.

Ya one small one (idea). I intend to stretch it out. Write it to a longer sentence. So my essay looks longer. (Eva, Interview 1, 8 July 2003)

The discourse of examinations had shaped the students' construction of writing. Writing was accomplished with the awareness of meeting the requirements of a scoring system. The students talked in terms of maximising their chances to get an overall high score by working with their strengths and weaknesses in each of the criteria. The normal practice is to focus on the external features of writing that could be objectified and enumerated for the purpose of the awarding of marks. There was little concern for writing as the development of ideas and argument.

Good Enough for Malaysian English

School writing in Malaysia is evaluated against Malaysian standards and the Malaysian system of grading. The public examination and the marking scheme take into consideration all Malaysian kids learning in all kinds of social, economic and educational contexts. For some students, to get an A for English in the PMR and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) was not that difficult. All but one of the 31 students in 4 Science 1 obtained an A for English in the 2002 PMR. For their SPM examination in 2004, Mr. Chen expected all of them to pass and many to achieve more than a pass.

I can tell you, more than half will get As, because our Malaysian language is very low. The actual, actual marking, huh, more than half will get As. And they know they can get As. (Discussion with teacher, 20 June 2003)

According to Mr. Chen, most of the students knew that their work was "Good enough for Malaysian English". While the majority of the students aspired to have a better command of English, they knew that their proficiency level was much better than that of rural students.

Mr. Chen attributed the predicted good results to the generally low standard of English in Malaysia. He never failed to remind me that this was a bunch of urban kids. In the rural areas, English is not as important in the daily lives of the people. English only exists in school and is generally heard and spoken only in English lessons (Mohd. Sofi Ali, 2003). This is part of the discourse of English as a second language as explained earlier.

Therefore, in setting an examination that takes account of various social, economic and educational contexts, the English examination board considers not only the phenomenon of the local variety of Malaysian English, but also the disparity in opportunity and motivation to use English between urban and rural learners. This has led to a strategic levelling of standards which caused many students to have confidence that their performance was reasonably good or "good enough".

Self-Censorship

Classroom writing reflected certain sanctioned themes, with the teacher as the controller and reminder of appropriate process plus product. The following interaction illustrates this. It is taken from a lesson in which Mr. Chen was giving feedback on the students' short stories. He was about to ask Ken to read his story which contained sexual references, an unacceptable theme in the school context.

INSTRUCTION DISCOURSE 1

Teacher: But er what we are going to hear now huh. From the, one of you, is er an essay which er (). Now I have nothing against sex. Ah Anselm, write the word sex on the board.

(The teacher asked Anselm, the class monitor, to write the word on the board. The whole class was getting more interested in what was coming next. They were smiling, giggling or laughing at the topic. The teacher wanted the word to be written BIG.)

Teacher: Big, big, big.

Student: Who, who, who?

(This student was curious to know who had touched on such a controversial topic although by now quite a lot of students in the class already knew who the writer was.)

Teacher: Nothing wrong with that actually er, but er, just a word of caution huh. Er, what we call formal essays, huh, especially

for examination to be read by teachers, examiners huh. We please avoid all this, huh, especially. In your own diaries feel free to write whatever you like. You can even share with your friends, if you like huh. But this is the real work. Please huh. So er, I know I asked you to be creative and you were very creative.

(The class laughed.)

Source: Lesson 10, 5 September 2003

Students were told to stay within mainstream themes and avoid issues regarding politics, race, religion and sex which were unsanctioned topics. The audience of school writing were also those who determined acceptable mainstream topics in the local context. Personal convictions on "touchy" issues could not be expressed in formal writing and school writing was not the platform for expressing these sentiments even if they carried some truth. Creativity was possible but only the kind that said what the examiners wanted to hear. The situations for writing were imagined but the assessment was real. School writing was "real work", and more important than informal writing such as diary writing, which was not bound by rules or taboos in Malaysian society.

Ken's reading of his short story was met with much laughter.

... Suddenly, both of the kids turn into sexy ladies and there are halfly naked. They then seduced Yun Tong. Yun Tong that looks like pig which has no girlfriend fell into the seducer's hand...

Source: Ken, Essay 5, 22 August 2003

The strong sexual content in this essay is clearly outside of norms in content for school writing. But here, Ken probably wrote to shock his friends and to poke fun at his classmate, Yun Tong, whom he described as a "pig". Before he started to read he was also asked to self-censor his essay. He asked Mr. Chen how to do that. But Mr. Chen's reply was not very helpful.

INSTRUCTION DISCOURSE 2

Teacher: I leave it to you. Now this one, just, just get the gist of what you want to say.

Source: Lesson 10, 5 September 2003

So Ken decided not to pronounce the word "penis" found a few times in his text, much to the amusement of the rest who could follow the story very well despite the gaps now and then. While the teacher commended him on his creativity the warning was clear that he should use his creativity to write acceptable content. The teacher also felt that Ken knew what should not be included.

INSTRUCTION DISCOURSE 3

Teacher: ...and he knows where to censor himself. [It] means he knows that it shouldn't be in. That's why I asked him to have self-censorship. Huh, I refused to tell him which are the words. At least he knew that it shouldn't be in his essay. It's all in Malaysia, ok? Not now, or ever maybe. I don't know.

Source: Lesson 10, 5 September 2003

Self-censorship is a product of the education system in Malaysia and a skill that these adolescents carried with them into adulthood. In the public spheres of their lives, Malaysians do not discuss certain topics openly especially issues that incite racial disharmony. These are the "ground rules" which Sheeran and Barnes (1991: 7) see as "aspects of cultural performances in particular contexts".

In 4 Science 1 class, both the teacher and students operated on the same set of ground rules, agreeable to them and at the same time embedded within the school institution and society. Mr. Chen stressed that these rules were applicable in Malaysia and changes were highly unlikely. Students knew what types of issues could be written about and what constituted mainstream stories and acceptable topics (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000; Willis, 1995). Any mention of sensitive issues relating to politics, race, religion and sex was seen as challenging the system that aims to impart values suitable for living in Malaysian society. The titles, themes and content of the students' work in this study support Medway's (1986) comments on writing curricula that encourage a stereotyped view of the world and a voicing of acceptable sentiments and values. In his analysis of the writing of 12-year-olds, Medway (1986: 36) discovered that students wrote about "topics that are already packaged in the culture as 'issues'".

On the whole, the students in 4 Science 1 chose acceptable themes to fit institutional and examination discourses. Although students' formal writing displayed a diversity of topics that reflected their creative abilities, they addressed these topics in a predictable manner (Tan, 2005). They drew on their own experiences to write the narratives but they tempered their narration to suit formal discourses, writing from their expected position as Malaysian adolescent students sharing a set of moral and societal values.

Ken's essay was but one of two essays (out of the 283 collected for analysis in this study) that challenged mainstream discourses with its strong sexual content and vulgarity. Although he knew that this content was definitely inappropriate and at risk of failure, he chose to test the ground, to gain attention and to have a bit of fun. Mr. Chen, and every one else, were certain Ken would not attempt this in an examination.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown the impact of the discourse of English language use and the regulatory power of the discourse of examinations in Malaysia on a group of secondary school students doing school writing. The discourse of examinations that narrows school writing to what is expected by examiners resulted in compliance and tactical or strategic responses from the students. Their approaches to the writing tasks include manipulating vocabulary and length, playing off grammar against content and writing within sanctioned topics. Moreover, students aimed to write just enough for them to get by in class and in the examination. Such engagement in writing discourages critical thinking and settles for mediocrity in standards.

These findings are similar to the findings in Mohd. Sofi Ali's (2003) study of English language teaching in three primary schools in Malaysia which showed external expectations caused learning, improvement and performance to be associated and equated with good results in public examinations. In another study by Shaharan (2003) on the writing proficiency of a group of Form 3 (Year 9) students in a rural school in Malaysia, it was found that the writing teacher in her study believed that writing was best taught through guided or parallel writing and the use of model essays. Given the English proficiency level of her students and the limited time to cover the syllabus, this approach enabled her to introduce her students to all they needed to know for the PMR examination. This teacher's priority was not really to teach writing, but to expose her students to all the text-types required by the syllabus. These were a teacher's strategic ways to cope within the discourses of examinations and ESL.

This paper points to the need to interrogate the discourse of examinations that uses public examinations as the primary measurement tool in deciding a student's future in life. One possible way to reduce the negative effects of such high-stakes assessment on students' writing development is to introduce ongoing class-based assessment and writing projects which acknowledge the students' continuous efforts in their learning. When the focus is shifted from performance in a one-time high-stakes examination to continuous writing development in class, students can experiment with writing outside examination genres. Additionally

they can benefit from the use of the process approach prescribed in their English textbook for writing. There can be more opportunities for multiple drafting, consultations with the teacher for continuous feedback and planned student collaboration. Hopefully this will produce more careful and grammatically accurate work, as argued by Fathman and Whalley (1990), Ferris (1997), Frodesen and Holten (2003), and Shih (1998).

In the Malaysian classroom, writing should be taught as a developmental process in which the students can enjoy self-expression in a variety of genres and learn to make meaning within certain constraints. This is consistent with the social practice discourse perspective of writing identified by Ivanic (2004).

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APPENDIX A

Classroom Observation Protocol

Date & Time: _____ Lesson on: _____

Observation item	Actions/Activities (supplemented by voices on the tape)	Comments (on personal, theoretical, methodological and other issues)
<p>Was there a stress on "getting the right answers" or "doing it the right way"?</p> <p>Did the teacher stress the importance of English and writing?</p> <p>Did the teacher talk about outcomes or rewards of learning English?</p> <p>Was the teacher strict over using only English in classroom practice?</p> <p>Did the teacher accept answers in another language?</p> <p>Did the teacher value students' ideas/suggestions?</p> <p>Were there restrictions on the</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• form of the product• time taken• choice of team members? <p>Was there any self or peer evaluation?</p> <p>Did the teacher use his/her authority or refer to rules/disciplinary system?</p> <p>Was there a stress on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• personal accountability• independence• leadership skills?		

Observation item	Actions/Activities (supplemented by voices on the tape)	Comments (on personal, theoretical, methodological and other issues)
<p>Did the teacher use praise and criticism to encourage learning?</p> <p>Praise/criticism was used on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effort • progress • success • good thinking • good suggestion • good guess • imagination, creativity, originality • neatness, careful work • good behaviour, follow rules, pay attention • thoughtfulness • politeness • cooperation <p>Did the teacher call upon students to answer questions?</p> <p>Only good students chosen?</p> <p>Did students ask questions or seek help from the teacher and peers?</p> <p>How did the teacher and students regard mistakes?</p> <p>Which was common:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can't learn without making mistakes. • Who has the right answers? <p>Did the teacher express his/her expectations of the task, school and homework?</p> <p>Was the lesson linked to moral, religious and other societal values?</p>		

Observation item	Actions/Activities (supplemented by voices on the tape)	Comments (on personal, theoretical, methodological and other issues)
<p>Were the theme/s of the syllabus covered in the lesson:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• people• environment• science and technology• social issues• values• health <p>Did the teacher compare students' achievement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• with one another?• with external standards?		

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions for Students

1. As a Malay/Chinese/Indian, would you say that you are

- (i) old-fashioned
- (ii) religious
- (iii) superstitious
- (iv) a follower of your culture

How else would you describe yourself as a Malay/Chinese/Indian?

2. How important is your culture/religion to you?

3. How does your culture/religion view English?

4. Has being a Malay/Chinese/Indian affected your proficiency or performance in English? How is it so?

5. As a teenager, would you say that you are

- (i) fun loving
- (ii) sad
- (iii) boring
- (iv) curious

How else would you describe yourself as a teenager?

6. As a student, would you say that you are

- (i) happy
- (ii) stressed
- (iii) smart
- (iv) hardworking
- (v) competitive

How else would you describe yourself as a student?

7. As an English language learner/user, would you say that you are

- (i) enjoying yourself
- (ii) confident
- (iii) worried

How else would you describe yourself as an English language learner/user?

8. What do you do in your free time?
9. What do you normally do after school everyday? (e.g., homework, TV, tuition, work, extracurricular activities, housework, go out with friends, hobbies, ...)
10. Who do you normally mix with in school?
11. Who do you normally mix with outside school?
12. What is your ambition? Please give some reasons for your answer.
13. What connection do you see between your ambition and English?
14. What are some things (e.g., the buildings, people, school rules, etc.) about your school that you like?
15. What are some of your problems in learning English?
 - (a) Which area do you have the most difficulty with: reading, writing, listening and speaking?
 - (b) Why is this so?
 - (c) Can you tell me some difficulties you have in learning to write in English?
 - (d) When you get a topic for writing or a type of writing task that you don't like, what do you do?
16. How much does each of the following matter to your school writing? Please place them on a scale of 1(not important) to 7 (very important).

	(not important)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 (very important)
(a) grammar		___	___	___	___	___	___	___
(b) grade/marks		___	___	___	___	___	___	___
(c) length of essay		___	___	___	___	___	___	___
(d) ideas		___	___	___	___	___	___	___
(e) feelings/mood		___	___	___	___	___	___	___

Please elaborate on your answers.

17. What kinds of writing do you do in English (e.g., essays, messages, email, netchat, letters, songs, poems, diary, etc.) in school and out of school?
 - (a) How often do you do this?
 - (b) Who do you share your writing with?
 - (c) Why do you do so?
18. How important is English to you now and in the future?
 - (a) What do you use English for now?
 - (b) Name some activities that you do not need English for now.

19. Would you say that you are learning English for the sake of your examinations? Why/Why not?
20. What does your English teacher look out for (e.g., grammar, spelling, organization, content, style, vocabulary, etc.) in your compositions?
21. Do you find the marking system helpful? Please give some reasons.
22. If you do not have to write any essays in English, how would you feel and why?
23. How do you think you can improve in your English writing?
24. Does your English teacher expect a lot from you?
25. Who else in your family use English?
 - (a) What do they use English for? (e.g., for communication, work, entertainment, etc.)
26. What are your parents' expectations regarding your school achievement or school marks?
27. Is your family influential in your decision making about what you will do in the future? Please give some examples.
28. What guidelines has your family given you regarding your choice of a career?
29. Would you like to add further comments to the points raised in this discussion?