Learning with a Sense of Adventure through a Multiliteracies Approach in an Examination-Oriented Learning Context

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Abstract
Some studies (Fung, 2010; Hwang & Mohamed Amin, 2007; Nadzrah, 2005; Puteh-Behak, 2013; Tang & Abdul Ghani Kanesan Abdullah, 2007) show that a significant characteristic in Malaysian learning is that the ability of a particular student is usually measured through his/her performance in the examination. In this examination-based culture, learning usually concentrates on techniques in answering examination questions through the process of drilling. Often students are well-prepared for the examination however unable to use the knowledge gained in praxis. Being part of a larger study, this paper explores the implementation of a multiliteracies approach in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in Malaysia. It was a participatory action research project and involved two lecturers as co-researchers and 30 Diploma of Civil Engineering students as participants. Data was collected through qualitative means such as classroom observations, informal conversations and classroom artefacts. Data was analysed through Critical Reflective Analysis Steps (Puteh-Behak, 2013) which included the process of observing and noting personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action. The findings suggest that through the multiliteracies approach the students experienced a shift from monotonous drilling activities to exciting yet challenging learning activities. It seems that the use of the multiliteracies approach enhanced the students’ learning experience by providing a sense of adventure in the usually-monotonous learning process.

Keywords: Multiliteracies approach, ESL, Examination-based setting, Participatory action research

INTRODUCTION
A significant characteristic in Malaysian learning is that the ability of a student is usually measured through their performance in the examination. Success of a student is measured to the number of As he or she obtained in the national examinations (Roselina, 2009) and those A’s are a major contributing factor that determine future direction of their academic journey such as boarding schools and university admission. 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, 2007; Pandian, 2005; Puteh-Behak, 2013; Roselina, 2009; Salmiah et al, 2013; 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, 2007) 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 completing the curriculum and emphasis on examinations inhibited teachers from being adventurous and using 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. The main problem of examination-oriented learning is that students often are well-prepared for the examination, however, unable to use the knowledge gained in praxis. Focus on examination success is hindering students in developing critical thinking skills as required by the 21st century (Roselina, 2009). The 21st century has gone through massive transformations in many aspects of the world including social, economic, technological, communication and working culture due to globalisation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a, 2009b; Gee, 2002; Kalantzis, 2006; The New London Group, 1996). Therefore, it is important for students to have necessary skills and knowledge to work well in the 21st century in a variety of domains such as work, academic and social settings. Students who are equipped with excellent results in the examinations and good memorization skills are no longer considered able to face the challenges brought by these transformations. At a basic level, students 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).

In order to do this, it is important to explore other pedagogical approach such as the multiliteracies pedagogy (The New London Group, 2000) to better equip Malaysian students with essential skills in the 21st century. This paper will answer the following research questions:

1. How the use of a multiliteracies approach facilitate learning in an examination-based learning setting in Malaysia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

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 21st 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 21st 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 21st century. Learning in the 21st 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 21st 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” (The 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” (The 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 21st century in learning, the New London Group (1996, 2000) suggests four components; overt instruction, situated practice, critical framing and transformed practice. 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).

**Multiliteracies in examination-based context**

The implementation of a multiliteracies approach was sometimes challenging as it may contrast certain socio-cultural attributes of certain learning contexts. 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 21st 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 (Tan & Guo, 2010, p. 323).

Pandian and Balraj (2010) also discussed a similar point when implementing a multiliteracies 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. 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.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participants**

The study was a participatory action research project that was carried out by a research team which consists of the researcher, which is the first author of the current article, and two Bakti Polytechnic (pseudonym) lecturers (Siti and Arfah) as co-researchers. The participants were 28 Diploma of Civil Engineering students who were taking English subjects. They were in their first year of their study in Bakti Polytechnic. 12 students were invited to be the focus group.

**The multiliteracies project**

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.
Data collection
The inquiry process in the current study involved a recursive process consisted of action research processes of planning, action, observation and reflection stages. Data was collected through observation, informal conversation, journal reflection and semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis
Data was analysed through Critical Reflective Analysis Steps (Puteh-Behak, 2013) which included the process of observing and noting personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action. At the observing and noting personal reflections stage, the research team observed students’ responses and learning process and noted significant events. Then, at the confronting and thinking stage, the team identified significant points 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. Critical points and potential themes were then identified. Next, the team provided a few practical solutions to improve the implementation of the multiliteracies approach. Finally, at the taking action stage, practical solutions to improve the multiliteracies approach were suggested.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
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 1.1:

Extract 1.1
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 as illustrated in Extract 1.2. Here the students repeatedly mentioned that their first reaction towards the second multiliteracies project was they were shocked and surprised. S1 and S6 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 1.1 and Extract 1.2 might not show the excitement of the students in describing their feelings towards learning using the multiliteracies approach, but, by listening and being in that conversation, the researcher noticed that the students were genuinely excited by the notion of the 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 1.2, noted that she was surprised when reading the description of the 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 multiliteracies project.

Extract 1.2

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!
Fariza: 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 1.3, 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 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.
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 1.4 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 multiliteracies project. They described their difficulties in completing the 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 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’.

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**Extract 1.3**

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 basic experience at all. No basic experience.*

Informal conversation, 22 January 2011
In another informal conversation with a group of male students illustrated in Extract 1.5, the experience of completing the 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.
In Extract 1.5, 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.
In Extract 1.7, 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.
In Extract 1.7 the students began by explaining the challenges or stressful situations they had faced in completing their second multiliteracies project. S6 mentioned that they felt pressurized 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.

CONCLUSION
Amidst the difficulties and challenges of completing the multiliteracies project, the students saw learning as risky, challenging, yet fun. This point led the research team to explore the 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 study was conducted in a specific setting in an examination-based classroom in one institution in Malaysia through qualitative means. The findings cannot be used to generalize and describe Malaysian learning settings as a whole. But, the findings of the study can provide substantial evidences in understanding how the monotony of examination based learning could be broken by adding the element of adventure through the use of a multiliteracies approach. Future researchers could explore this notion and conduct a research involving a bigger number of participants in a different setting.

References


