CONNECTING MULTILITERACIES AND WRITING PEDAGOGY FOR 21ST CENTURY ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Given the dynamic, global and multimodal character of English in the 21st century, it should be reasonable to expect English language (EL) teaching to accommodate the influences of media and technology on modern communication practices. In Singapore, education policy therefore highlights multiliteracies as one of three foci for the EL classroom. Yet, scant attention has been paid in research and practice to the impact of technology-mediated communication on writing pedagogy. This paper presents the findings of an extensive multiple-case study research project which sought to establish how multiliteracies pedagogy was being utilized in Singaporean secondary teachers' classrooms and the significant internal and external factors that contributed to classroom practice.

Methodology: The research explored six EL teachers' practices within one unit of work, focusing on writing skills. Data were gathered through video recorded lesson observations, pre- and post-lesson interviews to explore rationales and justifications for planning and implementation, and focus group discussions to establish common practices, values and beliefs towards writing pedagogy.

Findings: The study found that although teachers were aware of and trained in multiliteracy practices, they dominantly addressed writing as a monomodal form of communication, limited student autonomy and critical development, and neglected culture in their instruction.

Contributions: We argue that writing instruction must be socially situated and multimodal and teacher education must prepare practitioners to empower learners to become critical and effective writers. We also assert that examination-oriented practices make writing in the classroom inauthentic and largely incomprehensible, despite belief that the opposite is true.

Keywords: Language teacher education, literacy, multiliteracies, multimodality, writing.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As the New London Group (NLG, 1996) asserted, English in the 21st century is neither adequately described as a national language with a national standard nor a monomodal form of communication based around reading and writing. Today, it is a language deeply implicated in the performative, participatory and pluralistic cultures (Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Brugar, 2018) and image-driven environments (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) that have emerged in the digital era, which require our students to be multiliterate, multicultural and multilingual in interdisciplinary and intercultural contexts (Moje, 2009; NLG, 1996; Ruiz-Gallardo, Fernández, & Jiménez, 2019; Seglem & Witte, 2009). Hence, it should be reasonable to expect English Language (EL) teaching to acknowledge as well as accommodate in meaningful and productive ways these powerful influences. Given the trend, 'there is a clear recognition that young people will require a range of habits of mind and a great number of complex skills if they are to have any meaningful job opportunities in a day of closing doors' (Greene, 2000, p. 13). This is keenly understood in Singapore where 'demands for new skills, knowledges, and flexible competencies for globalised economies and cosmopolitan cultures will require system-wide innovation and reform' (Luke, Freebody, Shun, & Gopinathan, 2005, p. 5). Indeed, recent EL policy has contributed markedly to a broader and richer definition of literacy within our schools

(Lee, 2016); and with the implementation of the MOE's (2020) *English Language Syllabus 2020*, multiliteracies is set to become one of three foci for EL teaching for at least the next decade. The syllabus states: 'The increasingly competitive international environment calls for an even greater need for linguistic and communicative competence, adaptability and flexibility, to make sense of the massive rate of disruptions in every sphere of life' (MOE, 2020, p. 6).

Yet, writing pedagogy in particular seems particularly resistant to reform in Singapore as well as elsewhere (Kittle & Gallagher, 2020; Scherff & Piazza, 2005). In fact, it can be considered deeply entrenched in traditional literacy practices that 'have become dangerously narrow' (Gyenes & Wilks, 2014, p. 8); a problem that is particularly pronounced in high-stakes examination cultures (Biggs, 1998; Cheah, 1998; Kennedy, Chan, Fok, & Yu, 2008). After all, summative assessment practices 'tend to narrow views of writing to the mastery of widely-used processes in order to create a product that conforms to recognisable standards' and is thereby rendered 'culturally neutral' (Peterson, Botelho, Jang, & Kerekes, 2007, p. 30). In Singapore's examination-driven education system, the appetite for step-by-step writing instruction has not waned in spite of preservice training that has always closely reflected developments in the national syllabus. What we tend to observe in Singapore classrooms, as our research has also revealed, is a tendency to confuse faithful text reproduction with genuine text production.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Connecting Multiliteracies to Writing Pedagogy

The NLG (1996) had argued at the end of the 20th century that modern communication would increasingly become multimodal and that students, in turn, would need to be effectively multiliterate if they were to be or continue to be effective communicators in the 21st century. Their message clearly resonates in our current image-driven, technology-mediated new media reality, where digitisation has upended even previously held distinctions between producers and consumers that defined the mass media era and made text production more dynamic, dialogic and democratic as a result (Lankshear & Knobel, 2018). In the age of new media, text production in the classroom can no longer be a discrete and self-contained activity of putting pen to paper in a linear and predicable fashion (Gee & Hayes, 2011). It must be about 'designing' a text in a multimodal context (NLG, 1996) for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways –so as to mimic the spontaneous and unregulated conditions of the digital world.

This means that 21ˢᵗ century text production involves the manipulation of different and contrasting modes of meaning-making such as images, colours, fonts and the like in addition to more linguistic design elements (Shivers, Levenson, & Tan, 2017). To produce texts in a conventional manner is now a matter of choice, not a prerequisite in written communication. What is more, this is an issue that affects all learners equally regardless of their language abilities or classroom status as high ability, middle ability or low ability learners (Howell, Butler, & Reinking, 2017; Hughes & Morrison, 2014; Kaur, Ganapathy, & Sidhu, 2012; Paesani, 2016; Peterson et al., 2007). We cannot advocate one set of pedagogical practices for some students and another set of practices for others based on their abilities as we are preparing them all to face the very same economic challenges and social demands. We cannot allow ourselves to be preoccupied solely with individual achievement in examination situations (Drewry, Cumming-Potvin, & Maor, 2019). We must 'move away from learning *about* stuff and towards learning to collaborate, contribute, share, understand, resource empathise etc.' for that is what the world demands now (Lankshear & Knobel, 2018, p. 15). Multiliteracies is a very real vehicle for achieving such aims.

The pedagogy of multiliteracies teaches us that writing instruction cannot begin with the 'general and abstract' as it often does (NLG, 1996, p. 82). Neither can it rely on the mastery of writing conventions as they are under constant challenge due to the hybridization of cultural paradigms. To be effective, students must be immersed in a writing community that supports, guides and motivates their writing towards meaningful outcomes. To achieve these aims, we must follow four pedagogical tenets offered by the NLG: namely, *situated practice*, *overt instruction*, *critical framing*, and *transformed practice*.

To begin, *situated practice* recognises that true learning occurs via full and sustained 'immersion in meaningful practices within a community of learners' (NLG, 1996, p. 85). Viewed from the lens of situated practice, a student's linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds have power and legitimacy. The point of situated practice is to locate learning firmly in a context (or contexts) that allows students to negotiate what is formally taught alongside what is intuitively understood (Peterson et al., 2007). It assumes classroom relationships based on mutual trust and respect where students are at liberty to make their own meaning and decisions (Howell et al., 2017; Kittle & Gallagher, 2020).

To exercise oversight, teachers should leverage on *overt instruction*, which 'includes all those active interventions on the part of the teacher and other experts that scaffold learning

activities' (NLG, 1996, p. 86). Overt instruction provides students access to discourse systems and metalanguage that they would not be able to discover on their own. By embracing it, 'learners become active conceptualizers, making the tacit explicit and generalizing from the particular' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 4). It leads to big picture understanding. This, however, does not imply following formulas or templates. Overt instruction will help students structure their writing and their thoughts in accordance with sound design principles. It should provide them with key decision-making capabilities.

To disrupt the pattern of passive consumption, *critical framing* is vital: 'Through critical framing, learners can gain the necessary personal and theoretical distance from what they have learned, constructively critique it, [and] account for its cultural location' (NLG, 1996, p. 87). It is about making the familiar, unfamiliar; thereby making it the object of new scrutiny and new knowledge. Critical framing helps students learn to 'question what purpose writing serves … [and] if their writing shows that they are reproducing stereotyped, limited views of their places in the world' (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 30). It offers them critical distance, objectivity and alternative perspectives.

Finally, *transformed practice* provides space for the students to demonstrate their communicative competence established in one context in service of a different context. It provokes students to think critically about what they would communicate to readers in a given situation through their writing and not what external standards they must meet to satisfy teachers each and every time they write. It is thereby about realising authorial intentions, legitimacy and personal voice in their writing. Voice, after all, is an expression of agency, participation, commitment and identity (Peterson et al., 2007).

2.2 The Research Context

EL education in Singapore is both complex and multifaceted. Singapore is a small immigrant nation with three officially recognised 'mother tongue' languages (and many unofficial ones) in addition to English. The students must study either Mandarin, Malay or Tamil as their mother tongue in accordance with the ministry's bilingual policy, regardless of what home language they speak, based on whether they are ethnically Chinese, Malay or Indian. Malay is the national language, but English is the medium of instruction in government schools and is arguably viewed as the most vital for future success. English is at once colonial inheritance, economic necessity

(Ho, Alviar-Martin, Sim, & Yap, 2011) and the vehicle for communicating common values and beliefs that transcend highly sensitive racial and religious divides (Wong, 2014). It is also a language that privileges some and marginalises others.

The growing affluence of Singapore society has seen the steady rise in the number of English-speaking homes, but also, at the same time, great social inequality (Teo, 2019). An increasing majority of students now come from economically prosperous, English-speaking families and are effectively first language learners comparable to their counterparts in the West. However, a still significant minority communicate in their mother tongues at home. These second language learners are typically less wealthy than their English-speaking counterparts. Furthermore, there are also recent immigrants from the region, hailing mainly from South East Asia and China, to whom English is a foreign language. Such diverse student profiles create very obvious and difficult to resolve classroom problems for our teachers and a very real challenge to the implementation of new EL policies.

For nearly two decades, preservice EL education offered by the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore's sole teacher training institute, has continued to advocate for an increasingly progressive vision of the subject in line with the demands of both national syllabus and multicultural classrooms. After all, it is vital that Singapore teachers 'move away from the notion of literacy as a narrow, singular standard, authoritatively taught, to one which exposes their students to, and enables them to select judiciously between, a range of repertoires, genres and modes of communication' (Kramer-Dahl, 2008, p. 85). At NIE, student teachers are taught extensively about the integration of rich and multimodal texts into their teaching and the NLG's (1996) original paper on multiliteracies has long been required reading. Yet, it is difficult to see much change in actual classrooms. Traditional teaching practices driven by pragmatism, instrumentalism and teacher talk doggedly persist as many teachers still view them as vital for maintaining examination performance, especially when it comes to writing (Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018).

The divide between the intentions of teacher education and the actions of teachers once in the classroom is one that needs to be urgently addressed if we are ever to make real progress in EL teaching. After all, 'it is important to continue to strive in a multiliteracies direction in … teacher education' if we are to develop future-ready teachers who can teach effectively in diverse 21st century classrooms (Rowsell, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008, p. 121). Otherwise, they would not be in a

position to reverse current trends in student apathy and/or underachievement that greatly undermine active learning in many classrooms (O'Byrne & Smith, 2015). Pursuing multiliteracies is not an option, but a necessity. It is a means of promoting plurality and participation in meaningful and authentic ways: 'The affordances of technology provide a new window for new forms of pedagogy that are more empowering and democratic in orientation' (Robertson & Hughes, 2012, p. 76). However, teachers may not be adequately prepared to teach multiliteracies even though they may understand its importance (Macken-Horarik & Horarik, 2019). With this in mind, we asked two Research Questions (RQs):

(1) To what extent are the principles of the NLG's pedagogy of multiliteracies implemented in the Singapore secondary school writing instruction?

(2) What external and internal factors have a key role in shaping writing instruction in the Singapore secondary school context?

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Six EL teachers from three Singapore secondary schools participated in our multiple-case study project. We identified two experienced and capable teachers from each school, who could design and implement an original series of lessons (a unit) on writing. All the teachers had at least three years of teaching experience and were no longer considered beginning teachers by the system. Five of the participants were female and one was male, a gender imbalance which is not uncommon in the teaching profession here. They were all in their 20s or 30s, which is also quite typical. All had completed their preservice education at NIE as that is a condition of their employment. They have thus entered the profession having learned the same principles and theories, which should, in theory, inform their practice in similar ways. We have employed pseudonyms (Kate, Bill, Emma, Pam, Gayle and Helen) to protect their identities and hide their ethnicity. Their participation in the project was voluntary and the data collection was approved by NIE's official ethics review process.

All schools in this study qualify as 'neighbourhood schools', which in Singapore refer to government schools that cater predominantly to students living in nearby public housing estates. These students generally share the same socioeconomic background and come from lower and middle income families. Academically, these students are of below average to average abilities whose home language and cultural identity may be quite diverse; those of higher ability tend to

come from English-speaking economically affluent homes. The classes selected for observation were from the lower secondary years (13-14 years olds) in order to minimise the possibility of observing lessons dominated by exam preparation practices, typical at the upper secondary level. This added to the generalisability of the data across the various cases.

A combination of data collection methods was utilised in this study to ensure validity. We chose to observe units on writing which offered the most potential to engage learners and allow them to express their own values, thoughts, and worldviews. The selected units, comprising an average of six lessons which ranged from 35 to 70 minutes in length, were then observed, video recorded and analysed. The transcripts of the recordings together with observer field notes provided the bulk of our research data. Besides this, the project used interviews with teachers and focus group discussions (FGDs). One in-depth interview (45-60 minutes) was conducted with the two teachers in each school prior to observations (pre-observation interview) to learn about the design of the unit on writing. Furthermore, short (5-10 minutes) informal pre- and post-lesson interviews explored rationales and justifications for planning and implementation immediately before and after lessons. Finally, two focus group discussions (FGD 1 & 2) helped establish common practices, values and beliefs towards writing pedagogy. The first FGD was with the two teachers at each school and the second involved all teacher participants from the different schools. Lesson plan and teaching materials analysis was also used to ensure rich and broad data.

The data was coded and analysed through a two-stage process using NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software. Thematic coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to identify significant teaching episodes and incidents in the transcripts that would serve as evidence of a more critical multiliteracies pedagogy. Due to their scarcity, we shifted our focus to identifying those conditions which we believed were hindering their application in the classroom. A pattern soon emerged from the data with major themes such as 'test,' 'exam,' 'drill,' 'no time' and 'weak learners' which suggested that there were three key reasons for the lack of a critical stance in the classroom, which were: 1) a preoccupation with examination-centred instruction, 2) an underestimation of students' cognitive abilities based on their lack of language proficiency, and 3) the pursuit of writing practices designed to be effectively socially, culturally and politically neutral. In the second stage of analysis, both observation data and interview/FGD data were re-coded using these broad categories, expanding and collapsing previously identified codes.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section of the paper we present our analysis of the findings in relation to the two research questions we set out to answer. Our data revealed three major findings which will be presented and discussed below before we turn to provide specific answers to the RQs.

4.1 Writing as a Monomodal Form of Communication

Given the fact that examination practices and standards dominate classroom writing activities, it was not a surprise that our findings should surface an implicit understanding of writing as a stand-alone and monomodal form of communication. This is despite a willingness on the part of teachers to experiment with a range of multimodal texts to foster student engagement. The use of visual media such as short films and advertisements proved particularly effective as 'hooks' to gain the students' attention. However, no critical attention was given to their meaning-making potential or their relevance to modern writing/text production practices. Frequently, the texts were selected purely for their topical relevance to the prescribed and prescriptive writing task that was always examination-centred in either their form, function or content. Little to no attention were given to their richness, complexity or highly mediated qualities which could have prompted a deeper inquiry and raised learners' critical awareness about the evolving nature of language and communication (NLG, 1996). Instead, they operated primarily (and at times, exclusively) as information sources to aid task completion efficiently and accurately. At no time was the reliability of such information questioned; they were taken at face value. Otherwise, they served as 'linguistic objects' (Johns & Davies, 1983) and studied in terms of their structure and language use alone.

Students were constantly reminded that the ultimate purpose of the writing lessons was examination readiness. It was about knowing the right structure and the right words. In short, writing was described as being static, unchangeable and rule bound. Because of this, the classroom materials the teachers developed or adapted for the classroom were effectively little more than exam aids. In a lesson on expository writing using brochures as information sources, Helen's instructions and explanations about the texts they were studying made explicit the fact that everything she was making the students do had a specific examination purpose:

Teacher/Helen : Okay, remember we do visual text. Visual text is used … is tested in which component? Paper?

Student: 2.

Teacher/Helen : Paper 2 … comprehension passage. Section?

Student: A.

Teacher/Helen: A okay? So, we'll be going through this closer to the exams …again

(Helen, lesson 1).

In the few instances that students showed an inclination –and critical capacity– to probe further by asking valid and worthwhile questions, teachers were quick to curtail discussions citing a lack of relevance and time. For instance, when discussing about the victims of a crime they had just watched in a short film, a student suggested that the criminal could also be viewed as a victim in his own right given his underprivileged background. The teacher, Kate, however, was eager to move on rather than open the floor for dialogue: 'Okay, next. Shall we move on. Next one … Next issue' (lesson 3). The students quickly lost interest when they realised that they were only required to extract pertinent (and predetermined) key information from the texts and nothing more.

Although teachers readily acknowledged the value of student discussion in the FGDs, their need for classroom control during actual lesson time undermined this. Gayle even noted: 'If we leave it to the students to do their own discussion there will be a lot of digressions' (FGD 2). In general, the teachers found their students too unprepared, unfocused and unproductive to engage purposefully in small group discussions. That is why the majority of our participants opted for teacher-dominated whole-class work, where discussion, if any, only served to validate the teacher's talking points and answers. Teachers from one school were willing to provide space for student discussions, but it was clear that they had collectively decided as a department to invest the time and effort in establishing the rules and routines to ensure their long-term viability as pedagogy. School-wide support was clearly necessary for teachers to pursue and persist with such collaborative learning strategies.

Generally, writing pedagogy rarely deviated from examination-bound practice. Even when it did, in a lesson dedicated to narrative writing for example, it was still taught prescriptively rather than for creative engagement or enrichment purposes. It was not that teachers were not conscious of the limitations of their approach. Some were clearly uncomfortable with the fact that the text

types they were teaching were inauthentic with no real-world parallels: 'we realise that writing in today's world […] has changed ... Usually it is a mixture of writing' (Bill, FGD 2). Nevertheless, compelled by examination demands to do what they believed was best for their students, they saw no alternative except to write their own model examples that evinced the stock features they expected to see in the students' writing. They saw it as a natural part of their teacher responsibilities: to do any less (or different) would be to neglect their students' needs. Conversely, Howell et al. (2017) noted a similar belief in their teacher participant from an American high school recruited for their multiliteracies study: 'Her sensitivity to that responsibility persisted in spite of, and set up a palpable tension with, her genuine commitment to engaging her students with multimodal forms of writing in general and multimodal arguments in particular' (p. 202).

We observed overall that writing was dominated by prescriptions and templates which operated effectively in a vacuum devoid of any meaningful –and meaning-making– context. If learners complied with the given format, the writing was seen to have met expectations. No discussion took place on the actual substance of their writing because only the recognisability of the final written product seemed to matter to teachers.

4.2 Writing Instruction as a Constraint of Student Writing Development

Classroom practice in all schools was guided by the belief that students fell well short of exam standards. Like their American counterparts, they appear to 'have concluded that students *can't* write well without detailed teacher's instructions' (Kittle & Gallagher, 2020, p. 16). Because students were considered to lack the capacity to write like the teacher expected, students were made to write by following a rigid step-by-step method that gave them little space to exercise autonomy, let alone develop a personal voice. According to the teachers, these were necessary constraints given the students' limited language proficiency and general knowledge. Indeed, teacher control was highly evident in every phase of lessons from brainstorming to actual writing. In the final FGD, Emma elaborated:

If we want to have a rich discussion first, we need to provide the reading materials

to beef up their knowledge so that they have something to discuss. Otherwise, it's

just a lot of empty talk

(Emma, FGD 2).

This view was shared by her colleague in the same school:

Basically, their foundation in language is ... quite weak. So, I have to reinforce

in each paragraph what are the things that I want them to remember … so there

is a certain structure that they have to follow

(Pam, pre-observation interview).

In both instances, the students' prior knowledge, cultural practices and cognitive abilities were effectively ignored due to their perceived lack of language competence. A successful writing lesson, therefore, was measured by how accurately these linguistically 'weak' students were able to adopt wholesale the teacher's established points and prescriptions. As Kittle and Gallagher (2020) explain: 'Completing teacher-generated-step-by-step work is not learning; it masquerades as learning' (p. 16). The teachers themselves could not see how their approach to writing may have contributed to the students' passivity and low standards of writing production they complained about. Protracted, mechanical tasks, like copying notes wholesale from word-heavy slides, generated quite visible unrest as students struggled to stay focused –clearly pointing to a lack of motivation and engagement:

Gayle/Teacher: Okay! So! So, I will go through the slides, copy it down. So, the

first one is benefits, okay copy down on the first page please

(Gayle, lesson 3).

Helen/Teacher: Excuse me! Stop finding opportunities [to disrupt], continue for

goodness sake

(Helen, lesson 5).

> Helen/Teacher: Those of you who hand in empty worksheets, can stay back after
> school and copy 10 times
>
> (Helen, lesson 5).

Furthermore, across all the observed lessons, the students' attempts to ask their own questions and set their own agendas for learning in any small measure were consistently thwarted by teachers determined to have the students always follow their lead. Subsequently, there were no opportunities to consider writing skills in any meaningful, real world context that would allow them to think critically and creatively on their own terms.

4.3 The Neglect of Culture in Writing Instruction

Writing instruction did not consider the sociocultural contexts and experiences of the learners, and hence, the possibilities for situated practice were negated. Indeed, there was a general reluctance to explore the implications of cultural factors in writing as the topic of culture was viewed as uncomfortable and uncertain territory that was best avoided by all teachers. In fact, Bill said explicitly after one lesson: 'we totally drop the culture part because we don't really know how to define it to the students' (post-lesson interview, lesson 2). During the second FGD, there was consensus that open discussion about culture could surface underlying tensions in regards race and religion that were not deemed appropriate in multiracial Singapore where racial riots had once taken place in the years leading up to the nation's independence. As a solution, teachers maintained strict control over classroom topics, only bringing culture up when a task demanded it or to offer 'a global view.' Yet, even when introduced to fulfil this narrow agenda, it was reluctantly done. Kate stated: 'if we choose something that they are not familiar with because of the very specific cultural elements [...] we will have to spend a longer time explaining the text' (FGD 2). There was a tendency to treat culture only as content knowledge to be delivered by the teacher; students, it seems, should never be invited to generate their own meanings about it. Similarly, there was no recognition of writing as product of culture that could evolve over time.

Student curiosity about the plight of Thai orphans generated by a short film was answered by Kate dismissively with 'it's a different country' and a brief explanation (lesson 2). Her priority was with the recognising the narrative structure of the film only. When students wanted to probe further, she urged them to silence: 'Shh, later when we meet, we will go straight into our groups,

so I want individually first, shh listen everybody' (lesson 2). More problematic was the fact that other Asian cultures were often introduced to make misleading comparisons to Singapore, the prosperous city-state. As Bill readily admitted, depictions of poverty in the region were employed to 'let [students] be aware how lucky they are to be in Singapore, […] and how some children in other countries, they actually have to experience […] poverty' (post-lesson interview, lesson 3). Such cultural voyeurism encouraged no empathy or connection with the human problems represented –only gratitude at their comparative wealth and comfort afforded by Singapore. In any event, such an argument is likely to ring hollow for those students from less affluent homes who do in actuality experience economic hardship here (Teo, 2019).

Furthermore, issues of culture were constantly viewed by teachers in static and absolute terms. Singaporean students were always identified along ethnic and racial lines with no consideration for the intercultural aspects of their identities. Thus, they became subjects of generalisation and oversimplification by their teachers. For instance, Emma, who happened to teach a class that lacked ethnic diversity, declared that because the majority of her students were Chinese, they were well versed in that culture and its traditions. In contrast, their understanding of Malay culture was lacking as 'there is only one Malay student' in class (pre-observation interview). There was no attempt to view culture as a factor that influences writing to ensure effective communication with an audience. Texts were not used as a resource for intercultural discussion (Weninger & Kiss, 2013) even though they could have been. This reduced the learners' opportunities to participate in socially situated, meaningful writing tasks, where 'immersion in experience and the utilization of available discourses, including those from the students' lifeworlds' (NLG, 1996, p. 26) would be the norm. To conclude this section, we directly address our two RQs.

In regards RQ1, it became very apparent in our observations that the principles of multiliteracies were not implemented in Singapore writing classrooms despite it being part of a teacher's preservice education. The examination culture drove teachers to give constant emphasis to monomodal written products, not writing processes that were dynamic and multimodal (Kaur et al., 2012; Scherff & Piazza, 2005). As a consequence, the teachers provided students with generic models and templates devoid of context to replicate and follow blindly rather than the space to develop situated practice, through which the personal, social and cultural domains would be privileged and become integral to the meaning-making process of text production. Clearly, *explicit*

instruction was favoured over what the NLG term overt instruction. This may indicate that multiliteracies was not covered in sufficient depth in preservice teacher education leading teachers to follow established 'tried-and-true' methods they found in school: 'Too often in teacher education we think we are introducing student teachers to certain approaches when in fact we are largely teaching them verbalizations, without very much understanding' (Rowsell et al., 2008, p. 119). Indeed, teachers may be largely unaware of how restrictive and traditional their classroom pedagogy actually is. This was certainly the case with new teachers in the US studied by Rowsell et al. (2008): 'Although [the teachers] claimed to follow … [the multiliteracies] approach, the content remained fairly traditional and the teacher-student relationship somewhat top-down' (p. 119). There was nothing to indicate that our participants were any different.

In regards RQ2, the most obvious external factor shaping writing pedagogy in Singapore was the above-mentioned examination culture. Teacher education and national syllabus had made some difference to the teachers' attitudes and approaches, however. The teachers readily incorporated multimodal texts into their classroom practice. They all acknowledged that 21st century writing was fast changing and no longer conformed to strict text type dichotomies. Despite this, writing pedagogy in the classroom had not changed significantly. It was still very much mired in drill-and-practice routines. Internal factors perpetuating this status quo included the fear of failure and the fear of struggle (Kittle & Gallagher, 2020). Teachers seemed reluctant to have the students face difficulties in their writing. They were determined to give them an easy and efficient path to success. While done with the best of intentions, it had the effect of undermining student learning: 'Too often, in trying to help students, teachers do too much of the thinking. Students come to rely on formula and standardization' (Kittle & Gallagher, 2020, p. 19). Although it is useful to know writing conventions, students must still be empowered to make their own decisions and make their own mistakes if they are to ever to master effective communication on their own through their writing. What it means to write effectively can never be left solely up to teachers to determine. When teachers judge students based purely on their benchmark standards and examination requirements, they may in actual fact be using criteria that are no longer relevant or valuable for modern communicative practices (Peterson et al., 2007).

4.4 Discussion

The NLG (1996) warned against the continuation of a 'formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language' (p. 61) that is still very evident in writing classrooms in Singapore and elsewhere. Our findings have revealed that the prescriptive step-by-step approach to writing of the traditional classroom is still favoured above situated practice of the multiliteracies classroom. This alone seems to indicate that teacher education and national syllabus have had little effect on challenging the long-entrenched beliefs and practices established by schools. There are two key factors that contribute greatly to this problem. First, there is the very real effect of examination backwash, which creates a situation where working towards assessment standards is confused with student learning. Because of the threat of failure for both themselves and their students, teachers adopt a 'mimetic' strategy (Jackson, 1986) for achieving academic success that accounts for simple test-taking, but not complex social realities (Biggs, 1998). Conversely, this is a problem that is amplified in high-stakes systems, where examination performance is taken to be the singular measure of student achievement (Cheah, 1998). When efficiency is confused with effectiveness and student compliance with student understanding, overt instruction and transformed practice become impossible to actualise for too much of classroom practice is invested in maintaining the status quo of testing protocols.

Second, we must not discount the influence of deeply rooted cultural beliefs at play in the Singapore EL classroom. Here, as in other Asian contexts, the teacher is viewed as the ultimate authority figure whose expertise cannot be questioned. To challenge the teacher's views or even to offer their own perspectives in lessons is viewed by many students as signs of disrespect. In numerous Singapore schools, a silent classroom is still held up as an exemplar of classroom management. Given this situation, it is difficult for teachers to relinquish their authority in any way for fear of losing control over their students and inviting criticism. Even having the students speak up more can be viewed as a risky venture. Accordingly, when students are seen to be linguistically weak, the onus is always on teachers to bring them up to standard –not the students themselves. Because the school system demands high standards, many teachers tend to underestimate their students' abilities –especially when they are second/foreign language learners. Therefore, writing instruction is always kept simple, prescriptive, and well within the control of teachers so as to regulate against errors and 'distraction' that will likely compromise predetermined learning outcomes. Such predictable classroom environments serve to reassure teachers that only

their working definition of 'good English' holds sway but fail to meaningfully involve students in the learning process. Clearly this is not an environment where 'all learners are secure in taking risks and trusting the guidance of others' (NLG, 1996, p. 85). Teachers must understand that students are already actively involved in complex communication practices that are rich in implications for classroom learning, whether they are willing to acknowledge it or not (Howell et al., 2017; Hughes & Morrison, 2014).

4.5 The Way Forward in EL Teacher Education

In Singapore, the need for pedagogical reform is made evident in NIE's evolving approach to preservice teacher education via its flagship PGDE programme, the Postgraduate Diploma in Education. Not only was the programme extended in recent times from a 12-month to 16-month course of study, the core EL modules have undergone significant change and expansion. This was done in order to achieve a new range of progressive goals, chief among them to promote more hands-on work with materials design and development and the practical application of multiliteracies in Singapore classrooms. The inspiration for the programme restructuring had come from complex dynamic systems researchers (e.g. Davis & Sumara, 2012; Doll Jr, 2012; Hussain, Conner, & Mayo, 2014) who hold that learning is not a linear process, but a complex, dynamic phenomena. As such, it should not be a top-down model, or reduced to a positivist, Newtonian worldview. Accordingly, the previous approach to the methodology component of the programme which was to look at each core language skill –namely, reading, writing, grammar and oral communication– as discreet units of study was abandoned altogether. In its place was a new structure built on problem-based learning (PBL) that used teaching scenarios (or case studies) into which the various core skills were seamlessly interwoven. Through these massive changes, we hoped to nurture the kinds of student-centred pedagogies that beginning teachers should implement in their future classrooms. The redesigned module now features three teaching scenarios, each portraying a particular problem with which a different teacher and set of learners operating in a specific school context need to be dealt with.

By using this new approach to teacher education, writing pedagogy was made a part of a larger process of developing effective communication for 21st century realities. This required a balance between the demands for standardized learning outcomes and a flexibility for personal learning experiences that takes into account social realities (Brugar, 2018). In Leung's (2009)

words, our task was to develop a course that 'takes account of both sponsored and independent professionalism' (p. 55). Therefore, on the one hand, we wanted student teachers to master certain key concepts and skills which were deemed essential for a beginner professional. On the other hand, learning in the restructured programme was perceived as a multi-directional, dialogic process where 'new ideas emerge out of conversations, research, and experiences, these ideas are a result of the system of interactions and also fold back into the system to become part of the ongoing conversation' (Pratt, 2011, p. 43).

In one scenario, the student teachers were required to design a unit on digital text production for an upper secondary class taught by a teacher not well-versed in ICT tools. The purpose of this scenario was to introduce the teacher and her learners to the many possibilities of multiliteracies pedagogy and digital storytelling. A key learning outcome was the creation/design of a digital story utilising narrative structure, characterization and appropriate verbal and visual grammars (NLG, 1996). Built into the scenario were different language teaching theories: Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) (e.g. Farrell, 2008; Stauffer, 1969) process writing (e.g. Badger & White, 2000; Seow, 2002), multiliteracies (e.g. NLG, 1996; Bull & Anstey, 2010; Sewell & Denton, 2011), teaching pronunciation grammar (Thornbury, 2001) and spoken grammar (Goh, 2009). By navigating this unit, teachers developed a more holistic perspective on text production and were furnished with tools and skills that could challenge existing assessment-driven paradigms entrenched in Singapore schools.

Of course, it is difficult to do away with decades of tradition and educational practices overnight. Teachers are socialised into their roles through their own schooling and experiences as students. Thus, there is an understandable resistance to any form of change that seems to deviate from 'proven' classroom practices. Once in school, they will inevitably encounter many custodians of traditional methods that may prove a stronger influence than their brief period of teacher education. Indeed, it is too early to know whether the changes we have made to the structure and content of the PGDE programme will eventually bear fruit. All we can say for now is that the reforms were urgent and necessary –and still are.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Writing instruction that recognises neither a student's potential nor the mutability of language within varying and dynamic intercultural contexts must concern us as EL educators and researchers

in the 21st century. While we do not deny that the language competence of learners determines what can happen in the classroom, it is problematic for teachers to view them automatically and unvaryingly as deficient and incapable, especially when they are already part of the digital world and its communication practices outside of school. The tendency of teachers to underestimate student potential plays a large part in perpetuating traditional writing pedagogy. Language ability is never a measure of cognitive ability or cultural capital. This is made especially apparent when teachers are seen assessing language ability based on the narrow parameters of examination performance that explores no meaningful real-world context or lived experiences of students. After all, cognitive ability and cultural understanding are developing in ways that are not fully captured by norm-referenced measurements. We also assert that the pressure of teaching to the test as opposed to social use makes writing in the classroom inauthentic and largely incomprehensible except as an exercise in conformity with established procedures. Given the fact that English is fast becoming a language expressive of modern Singapore identity (Dass, 2015), the notion of writing as self-expression within classrooms will need to be constantly acknowledged and advanced.

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