



UTS
ePRESS

Literacy and
Numeracy Studies:
An international
journal in the
education and
training of adults

Vol. 28, No. 1
Dec 2020



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Citation: Abraham, A. 2020. Transforming practice through an understanding of socio – cultural conditions in the classroom. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies: An international journal in the education and training of adults*, 28:1, 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v28i1.7017>

ISSN 1839-2903 | Published by UTS ePRESS | [url of journal](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

Transforming practice through an understanding of socio – cultural conditions in the classroom

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v28i1.7017>

Article History: Received 15/01/2020; Revised 16/08/2020; Accepted 04/10/2020; Published 19/12/2020

Abstract

Much of the debate on the teaching and learning of English and academic writing occurs largely from Eurocentric or Western perspectives on local contexts. This paper explores the role of the local English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in transforming the way English for Academic Purposes is taught and learnt, particularly in higher education settings in Malaysia. In order to challenge Western notions, ESL teachers need to know their local contexts and students well enough in order to explain the complexities that arise within an education system that is continually shaped by historical and socio-political shifts in the country. The purpose of this paper is to inform ESL and academic writing teacher-researchers that it is possible to transform practice by paying close attention to the complexities of socio-cultural conditions of their context. Using action research methodology, the case study presented here illuminates and exemplifies the recognition and explicit inclusion of socio-cultural conditions within academic literacies in a tertiary English in a Malaysian university. Three narratives are critically selected via the Critical Incidents Technique. Green's typology of operational, cultural and critical dimensions of literacy events is used to analyse how socio-cultural conditions within and beyond the classroom can affect the kinds of literacy which are identified by the teacher and used to improve student engagement and performance. Findings reveal the need for greater leadership support for grassroot level decision-making by the ESL teacher and a deeper understanding of the use of mediation as a tool to maximize social interaction. English language learning, so that students can be better prepared to meet global challenges.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Introduction

Much of the debate on English language teaching, particularly in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) domains is largely explored by Western scholars whose views are often deemed universal (Basturkmen 2012; Pennycook 2004; Graddol 1997). While the generation of new scholarly ideas in the English language teaching world is encouraged, such Western contributions do not always resonate with Asian ESL teachers, who are trying to make sense of their own teaching practices within their own locale, practices have been largely shaped by their own local socio-cultural and historical influences. With the onset of globalisation and the rise of the Asian century (Bajunid 2014; Lim 2014), there is a need therefore to add and diversify these Western views with locally infused narratives or stories in order to transform practice and problematise theory.

I argue in this paper, that it is possible to explore the roles of the ESL and EAP teacher in transforming practice by paying close attention to the complexities of the socio-cultural conditions that are played out in an ESL and academic writing classroom within a British Malaysian university. The reason why ESL and EAP are specifically mentioned in this paper is because those were the areas in which I was conducting action research. My students were predominantly ESL learners (as it was termed in Malaysia at the time because English was regarded as the nation's second language after Bahasa Malaysia, the official language) and my teaching environment was within an Academic and Learning Support Unit of the university.

The paper outlines the rationale for transforming practice, the contextual definition of socio-cultural, the methodology employed for this research, the selection of three particular stories and the discussion which ensues based on my research question and my analytical framework. What makes this contribution unique is the idea that Western theories, which are infused within a local setting and made sense of by a local Malaysian Indian teacher, is not something commonly addressed in the wider debates of EAP or ESL.

Literature Review

RATIONALE FOR TRANSFORMING PRACTICE

As a result of globalisation, English is no longer a privileged possession of native speakers situated within the perimeters of the inner circle or norm-providing countries (native speaker countries like England, USA, Australia and Canada). It now encompasses an outer circle (colonised nations like India, Malaysia, Singapore and Africa) and expanding circle nations like China, Korea and Japan. In fact, the terms 'inner, outer and expanding circles' were first coined by Kachru (1985:2) to explain what the different types of 'World Englishes' were. English is now widely spoken and no longer confined to just the three concentric circles as the fluidity of people migrating between countries (Graddol 1997) have changed the dynamics of how English has spread (Doan 2014). This means that the 'ownership' of the language is shared across the globe. The role of English in outer and expanding circle countries have to now be considered from a 'sociolinguistically realistic' point of view, where English is being used 'as they find it and as they will' (Kachru & Nelson 2006:34). The concept of 'native' has also been challenged to include a more comprehensive view of what native means (Kachru 1985, 1986, 2000). This includes the exclusive usage of English or immersion in it since childhood, using the language in all aspects of communication and finally the ability to read and write fluently in English. Baker (2009:9) argues that:

Languages and their relationships to cultures and identities need to be understood as fluid, liminal and emerging in instances of communication, rather than as a priori defined categories. Moreover, this raises important issues for English language teaching (ELT) in Asia, suggesting that ELT needs to incorporate a more dynamic and fluid conception of language, culture and identity than the traditional target language-target culture correlation.

What the above quote implies is that the evolving nature of the English Language, as a result of cultural and identity influences, forces ELT teachers to rethink and reconcile with the fact that the way English or academic writing is learnt or taught over time differs greatly from the traditional textbook approach to a more functional and practical approach of teaching and learning EAP. The functional approach builds towards higher forms of literacy, ultimately calling for teaching and learning to be regarded as a social practice (Lea & Street 1998, 2000). What this means specifically is that teachers need to be aware of complex situations within and beyond their classrooms and how the historical and socio-cultural dimensions of the surrounding community affect and shape teaching and learning conditions. The local needs to be understood in relation to other locals as well, including how power relations over time affect the scenario of the whole teaching and learning experience. There is no point in using Western theories to understand local settings unless it is clearly explained in relation to the local.

As part of my PhD study, I conducted this research within an EAP and ESL setting. Although I used a Western-based theory: Academic Literacies (Lea and Street 1998), I infused a local understanding of the socio-cultural conditions that needed to be understood within this theory so that it would make more sense to the learners and to me. Park (2012) reiterates the need for non-native teacher identities to be considered when planning frameworks for teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). The non-native teachers are the ones who will impart new knowledge to their respective culturally diverse student groups in their own communities.

I am arguing therefore, that it is imperative for the local ESL and EAP teachers to add their own voices and reconceptualise their teaching practice with a framework that is culturally sensitive to their own teaching and learning environment. Academic writing teachers need to think of how they could develop a wide pedagogical repertoire which takes into account the learners' perceptions and identities about language learning so that their own teaching practice could improve. It is possible for teachers to transform ESL and EAP practice by paying close attention to the socio-cultural aspects within and beyond the classroom.

MAKING SENSE OF THE SOCIO-CULTURAL

For this paper, the focus is on socio-cultural conditions within an Academic Literacies (AL) paradigm (Lea & Street 1998, 2000). The socio-cultural is what makes the Academic Literacies perspective to teaching academic writing stand out as a social practice. Without a deep understanding of the socio-cultural, the knowledge and power relations will also not be fully appreciated or made sense of by the teacher.

In my study I draw on an analytical framework developed by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as formulated by Engeström (1996). Engeström built on Vygotsky's (1978) theorising of social interaction as a necessary component of a child's development. While Vygotsky focused on the learning individual, Engeström (1996) focuses on collective learning and proposes a diagrammatic representation of how learning and development occurs (see Figure 1). The diagram is based on Engeström's argument that the unit of analysis should be the activity system, comprised of the subject from which perspective the learning is viewed, the tools that mediate the learning, the object of the learning, the rules (formal or informal custom and practice) that guide and constrain possibilities, the community of people involved in the learning and activity and finally the division of labor within the community. Popova (2014) has utilised this idea of the activity system as a framework for examining what she calls the Praxis of English Language Teaching (PELT). As I will show, the questions I asked about my own teaching in this study have been informed by Popova's PELT formulation.

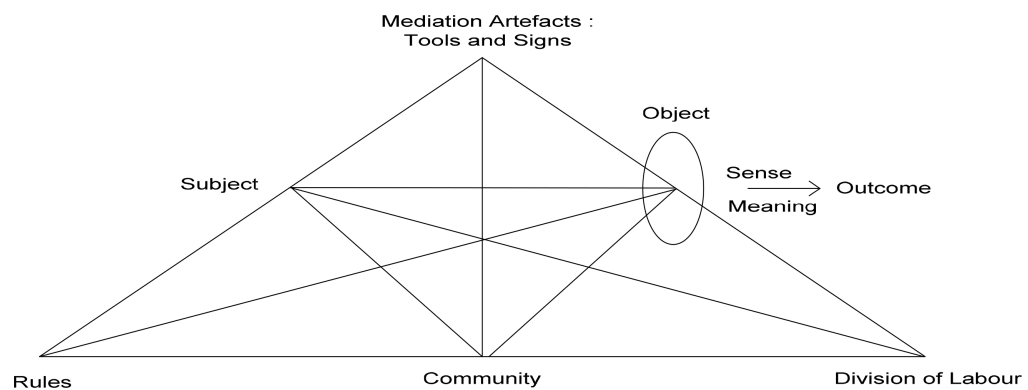


Figure 1. Engestrom's human activity system structure (1987, p. 78)

The diagram helped me to understand that there were implicit (hidden) and explicit (readily observable) norms of the socio-cultural (Dalglish, Evans and Lawson 2011) that were operating in my classroom and I wanted to know how best to relate my knowledge and understanding of the local social conditions to what I was teaching in the classroom. The students and I were the subjects. The production of academic texts was the students' goal and mine was to ensure that they were learning well. I used cultural mediating tools around me to help me accomplish the task. However, I also had to comply within the set rules of the institution and consider the needs of the community and its impact on the learners. I became aware of my role as a teacher in relation to all who were around me and all that was happening around me at the time.

Analytical Framework

Having understood the historical development of 'socio-cultural' and what it meant in my context, I wanted an analytical framework that would pay attention to the socio-cultural conditions so that I could gain greater insight into my teaching and possibilities for change. For that, I turned to Bill Green's (1988) typology of literacy which covers operational, cultural and critical dimensions. Green's literacy dimensions helped me to think about literacy in a broader context, encompassing various mediating social elements that affected my students' learning, tying in neatly with Engestrom's activity diagram. The three dimensions can be explained as follows:

- the operational, referring to the structural, grammatical elements in writing,
- the cultural which refers to the culture that the students bring into the classroom and the culture of the institution, and
- the critical which refers to the ability of the students to engage in critical discussions and make their own evaluations and judgements about learning.

Socio-cultural conditions within the Academic Literacies paradigm involves a highly complex activity system that needs to be unpicked in ways that the EAP teacher can use to comprehend and make sense of her own journey, and in the process help her learners improve their English and academic writing skills. Green's literacy typology is structured in a way that can help the teacher pay attention to the different dimensions of literacy in conjunction with the socio-cultural issues.

One such way to do that is to ask pertinent questions that can help the teacher position herself or her role within this complex learning system. These questions are shown below under my main research question to help me understand the working dynamics of the activity system within and beyond the community of teaching and learning I was a part of. The activity system sits within the socio-cultural conditions of the AL paradigm and understanding the system provides valuable insight to help teachers deal with power

imbalances within the power structures of the teaching and learning organisation which teachers normally do not pay attention to.

Research Methodology and Design

I employed action research as a methodology to understand the socio-cultural conditions that were played out within and beyond my classroom. Hien's (2009) definition of action research speaks to the suitability of this approach in my investigation:

Briefly, action research is so suitable to education as it is a process of exploration in which teachers explore such things as themselves as educators, their lives or unique perspectives of their students, the structure and practices of educational systems in order to bring positive change to their schools and communities. (p. 103)

In short, it allows for the exploration of complex local social and cultural systems within educational set-ups in which the teacher and the students are intricately involved. In fact, most action researchers acknowledge that it is through a systematic, reflective and cyclical inquiry that conditions of practice can be improved (Noffke & Somekh 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart 1982; Carr & Kemmis 1984; Kemmis 2006, 2007, 2010). Koshy (2005) adds that action research is also based on context and participation in the classroom where emergent practice is analysed, reflected on and evaluated. Although the aim of action research is to problem-solve, there may not be a final outcome. This is due to action research being cyclically and dynamically fluid and somewhat unpredictable in nature (Creswell 2005).

Each of my six action research cycles involved the following phases as depicted in the diagram below:

- problem identified
- reconnaissance phase
- forming of action research question
- action taken
- data collection and analysis
- further reflection

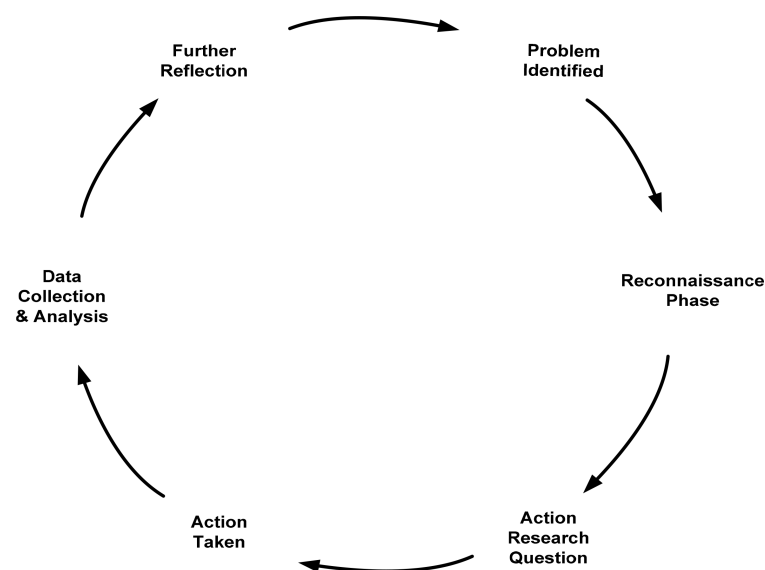


Figure 2. My Action Research Cycle
 Adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart's action research model (1982)

The problem I identified in my context was that my students had serious writing problems which were discovered after their diagnostic tests that were conducted upon entry into the Foundation programme at the University I was teaching. I wanted to find out how best I could assist my learners to improve their English and academic writing skills through an understanding of socio-cultural perspectives which I gleaned through my literature review within the Academic Literacies framework. This was the reconnaissance phase. To this end, my main action research question was:

To what extent do socio-cultural conditions within and beyond the classroom need to be paid attention to and how can they assist the ESL teacher in improving the teaching and learning of academic writing?

To break down that question further, I looked at some of the questions posed by Popova (2014) and was inspired to think of smaller questions I could frame in order to understand the complexities of the socio-cultural activities in my classroom. These questions are as follows:

- Who was the subject? Was it me or the learners? Or was it my colleagues?
- What was the object of my writing tasks?
- What tools did I use to accomplish the writing tasks/ did I make use of all that was available? Was I aware of the culturally mediated tools that existed?
- Who made up the teaching and learning community within and beyond the activity system? What socio-cultural influences affected the students' learning and my teaching? In what way was power relations evident in the division of labour and how did it affect the teaching and learning within the activity system in my classroom?

My ontological stance and general worldview are interpretive and phenomenological (Heidegger 1962; Husserl 1970, 1980) in nature as I looked into the lived experiences of my participants and interpreted these experiences through various cycles of critical reflection in order to make sense of this entire journey. I also examine how, through a sound action research study, I can begin to make sense of the professional, personal and political dimensions of myself as the subject within the activity system (Noffke 1997). The professional dimension refers to the way in which I was operating at work, including my membership of the English language teaching profession; the political dimension refers to the way power works in an institution and how it affected my learners; and the personal dimension refers to the way in which I was researching and improving my practice and the ways in which students' lives change through language and learning.

Once ethical clearance was obtained for this study, I collected my data through diary recordings, student interviews and letters from students about my teaching and their learning. Occasionally, there were staff members who wanted to express their views to me voluntarily which I had not planned for but welcomed to gain a broader view of what was happening around me. I did multiple cycles of action research from 2008-2010 and systematically reflected on these cycles.

In order to be rigorous about selecting the right data for analysis, I used the Critical Incident Technique to highlight issues pertaining to the socio-cultural which needed to be critically examined. This technique was popularised by Flanagan (1954) who discussed it in terms of how certain behaviours of pilots that were considered critical and which affected their flying, were recorded. Tripp (1993:24) defines it as follows:

It refers to some event or situation which marked a significant turning-point or change in the life of a person or an institution . . . or in some social phenomenon

Critical incidents are also not planned or controlled and they can highlight a problem or provide a solution to the teacher (Woods 1995). In fact, in a school or classroom environment, critical incidents are what the teacher perceives or interprets to be an event that needs to be paid attention to. Many small incidents happen at school every day and these events are not special in any way unless we give meaning to justify why they are critical and why they need to be highlighted (Angelides 2001).

Recognising the critical elements in each event helps ESL teachers to identify and build on the emotional links to each incident which then balances out (Tripp 1993) the otherwise mundane and technical box-ticking teaching job that most ESL teachers are required to do. Besides the emotional investments, critical incidents also enables the teacher to examine the self, power relations, the way the institution works and become more confident with his or her findings (Brookfield 2017) and develop a desire to lend a local voice to the teaching and learning debates at a wider level and seek ways to further and understand and improve practice.

The data I have selected to be included in this paper are three sets of stories. I describe them as stories which are reflected on from the contemporaneous and hindsight analyses in each of the action research cycles I went through. There were many stories to choose from my diaries but from a critical incident perspective and also in view of the scope of this paper, I selected only three stories. The stories were selected bearing in mind that the AL theory, Green's literacy typology and the critical incident technique could be linked together. The socio-cultural condition in AL ties in neatly with the cultural and critical aspects of Green's literacy, making the link between the two frameworks more robust for this action research. The critical incident technique of selecting critical events was based on choosing stories which reflected a social or cultural understanding of teaching and learning circumstances that were presented. The aim was to use these stories to help teachers understand how the socio-cultural in the classroom could be used effectively to improve teaching and learning conditions. The analysis of the stories took on a structure based on McCormack's (2004) four-stage analysis method comprising i) analyses of background information of the story, ii) the language used in the story, iii) the context and the culture of the story, and iv) unexpected elements which arose from the story (McCormack 2004).

STORY ONE (PERSONAL DIARY ENTRY – MAY 2008):

'The poo bucket'

"Miss! My aunt in a kampung used to ask her family members to fill a bucket with faeces or piss before throwing it away...since there were no toilets!". Most of the class went... "Eeowww...we just had our lunch!"

The background to this story is that the Business students that I was teaching were required to write an academic paragraph on water shortage that is affecting the world today. A power point presentation with some information about how water is wasted and how such wastage can contribute to serious water crises was shown. Students were asked to think about their own lives and how they used water and that was when the above sentence was uttered by a Chinese boy who used to live in the north of Malaysia. For the purpose of discussion, I shall call this boy Mark.

The language used by Mark is casual, with a hint of humour and a desire to share his knowledge about water usage during his childhood. He wanted the class to know a little bit about his past and his upbringing because he was comfortable with the class and with me, his teacher. Mark opened up the discussions in ways I never imagined possible and therefore paved the way for me to facilitate the discussions into more meaningful expressions of writing. The opening up of discussions not only helped Mark but also other ESL students who found it difficult to express their thoughts verbally before trying to write them out in an academic manner.

The context and culture in which Mark described his story was something other students could relate to as 'kampung' or traditional villages. These villages can be found throughout Malaysia and the lifestyles in those circumstances are often rural and peaceful, different from the vibe of modern city life that many of the class students were accustomed to. Kampung folk also often resort to simple living, conserving energy through environmentally friendly ways which was not taught in schools but rather practised because of handed-down generational customs. Most of the students could therefore, try and imagine what he was

saying especially for those who have had some of their own family beginnings originate from kampong settings and for those who did not, it became fascinating for them to ask more questions about the experience. There was also laughter and easy camaraderie among the students because they were comfortable with each other.

It was certainly an unexpected surprise for me to hear Mark's contribution, which was quite embarrassing and personal to share and also because he normally did not speak out as much as the other students. In an interview later with me, Mark explained that his reluctance to speak in class was largely because he felt he did not have the confidence to speak well and felt there were other students who had a better command of the language and as a result, he sometimes felt shy to ask questions or share such information. However, on that day, Mark felt compelled to share because his experience with using a bucket to poo during his childhood days was something that he still held vivid in his memories. His sharing of the story brought his experience to life because the discussion that ensued was engaging. Language was not a barrier for him at the time because the experience was meaningful and he was living in the experience of the moment.

In hindsight, the social interactions in the classroom as a result of the power-point presentation came alive through Mark's story. The story enabled me to understand how I could position my role to help him and other students understand what was going on and relate the story to the bigger picture of what water conversation and avoidance of water shortage was all about at a global level. The subjects were me and the learners, as a team, co-constructing and trying to find a way, to build on the task of writing up a piece on water shortage in a fun and relaxed manner. The power of how the class was moving and taking shape eventually shifted from me to the learners. The teacher was merely a facilitator and most learning decisions were made by the students. This was possible once they were able to transfer their operational literacy levels to a more critical understanding of what was required from their task (Green 1988). Within this activity system (Engestrom 1987), learning was achieved as part of a community experience. It was about building on knowledge from the past and linking it with the present in ways that helped make sense for the learner, Mark. Mark and his friends eventually produced good pieces of writing after a few drafts. As an action research teacher, what I learnt from this experience was that the students could take ownership of their work, once they were comfortable with their thought processes and developed the confidence needed to work through their writing issues in a non-threatening environment.

STORY TWO (PERSONAL DIARY ENTRY- SEPTEMBER 2009):

My breast lump

For today's lesson, I shared about my breast lump, which was benign, discovered after I first got married. I laughed a little to ease the tension (they looked glum!) and I told them that I felt vulnerable at that time and that during the honey-moon period I wondered if my hubby would still love me if I had once breast chopped off! They laughed...I also shared about the doctor who treated me...he was very concerned and caring...he asked all the right questions and made me feel comfortable.

Then they were curious and started asking questions to explain more....one boy asked...what did the breast lump look like?

The background to this story was that the students from a Bioscience class were required to paraphrase a difficult paragraph on bone deficiency, which was taken from their prescribed textbook. During that period, there was prominence given to the issue of bone deficiency in women by the Health Ministry. Some advertisements on TV encouraged calcium supplements to be taken to strengthen the bones of women, in particular those who have issues during menopause. I wanted to try and help the students understand this rather dry topic and also stay relevant to what was going on in the outside world from a medical point of view and thought perhaps a personal story would help the class make sense of a difficult topic like this.

The language used was very personal and informal. It was something I felt compelled to share as I was aware that the story had an interesting quality to it that I could use as a teaching tool. It was a simple way of trying to convey the idea that medical issues, while difficult to understand, need to be tackled because for the Bioscience students, it was part of their disciplinary knowledge. Failure to engage in such topics can often result in students not knowing their fields well enough to produce a good piece of academic writing in their subjects.

The context and culture of the classroom was such that most students were quite open to the idea of sharing personal information. What was special was that it opened up the way for a female Muslim student to share about her own story about a lump. Her story highlighted how she faced problems with a University doctor who appeared rather sexual in his bedside manners. I asked whether she complained about him; she said she did not because she was afraid. She was confused and did not really know what to do at the time. She did however seek a second opinion afterwards, and discovered that her lump was benign. I later found out that the doctor was no longer practising in the University. The girl's story gave me an opportunity to also stress on the students' rights to seek protection from any kind of abuse especially within a university setting. However, because of the hierarchical system of the institution, she was afraid to voice her fears and only did that once she felt empowered to do so. This story also made me more aware of my responsibility as a teacher who should know her students well enough in order to help them combat such difficulties because very often, students are afraid of speaking up over such sensitive issues within hierarchical settings.

The unexpected sharing from this girl made me realise that social interaction is a powerful mediational tool that ESL teachers need to tap into; it helps build cultural and critical levels of literacy in ways that teachers cannot always anticipate. While a teacher may be able to plan a lesson, it may not always go the way he or she anticipates as a result of mediating elements that are beyond the teacher's control. As an action researcher, I became more aware of these mediating tools around me and resolved to find ways to utilise these tools in my teaching for subsequent cycles.

This understanding is significant for ESL and EAP teachers to grasp as it means that they need to be paying close attention to dimensions of socio-cultural conditions that can be converted into teachable moments. The student, who has been uncritically accepting of authority, also learn that authority could be questioned and that she was entitled to seek ways to address her insecurities and worries by talking and making known her issues to get a wider perspective on what is right or wrong. Class discussions paved the way for her to make meaning out of her experience and this also made the other students ask her questions and engage in further discussions which then made it easier for me to introduce the bone deficiency topic and tackle the exercises on paraphrasing before they wrote their final paragraphs.

STORY THREE (DIARY ENTRY-MAY 2010):

Thomas Cup/badminton defeat

"We lost miss...Malaysia is only good for playing guli, congkak and gasing!"

The background to this story was that I was very excited to test the Engineering students' understanding of what I had already taught them about three weeks – which included identifying fragments, comma splices, choppy and stringy sentences in a paragraph. They were going to be tested on these elements for their next academic writing test. As a prelude to the test, I thought I could use the magazines in the library (e.g. *The Hub*, *The Expat*, *Time*, *The Economist*.) and get them to select some good examples of these elements from the magazines but then change or 'create' wrong sentences based on these elements and quiz their classmates to see if they can get the correct answers. It was quite tricky but I had the confidence that they could do it as they had completed so many exercises on this topic already. They were divided into groups for this task.

The mood of the class however, was sombre and I noticed the students looking bored and restless. The sombre mood was not the norm for this class; they were usually quite responsive and enthusiastic, especially

when it came to creative tasks or quizzes that challenged them. Although they were doing the task, they seemed unhappy. I could not ignore the negative or sad vibe of the class and asked what was wrong. The utterance shown above was one of despondency and resignation. It was one student's way of saying that what he and the rest had witnessed on TV the night before or read about for the past few days in relation to the national badminton team's performance at an important badminton event, known as the Thomas Cup, was disgraceful and upsetting.

It was clearly difficult for the students to concentrate in class as a result of the low morale felt after the national badminton team's crushing defeat. It forced me, as a teacher, to pause from continuing my teaching objectives to concentrate on the students' needs first - which was to talk about this loss. Frustrations were expressed at China's dominance at the games, defeating even great teams like Indonesia who were always known to be world badminton champs. More importantly, the students expressed that they had high expectations for the national team, which they felt let the country down. Criticism was levelled at the Malaysian players, for not displaying the kind of fighting spirit that China's players showed, in spite of the fact that Malaysia had the advantage of playing on home ground. For many Malaysians, winning the Thomas cup (which had been done before and which threw the nation into a euphoric state of national celebration of immense proportions) is a visible sign of national pride. It signified a collaborative effort from different ethnic groups playing individually and in pairs, as part of a national sporting team to be recognised as world champions at a global level, something that Malaysian sportsmen rarely achieve. During these Thomas cup matches, the whole nation comes to a standstill, waiting with abated breath to see if Malaysia would deliver the winning gold medal.

Against this backdrop, I realised the need to step back and listen to the students. I did not expect them to feel disinterested in learning, thinking that it was just sports. I was wrong - as it was not just sports, but as though their whole life depended on it. There was no point in going on with my teaching plans until they had their say. It was difficult for me to suddenly change what I had planned for the day but I had to do it once I realised they were not emotionally invested in the work I had prepared for them. I could not proceed with the critical elements of learning until the cultural elements were addressed (Green 1988). I had to think of using this situation as a way for them to write about this loss and use that as an exercise instead, to understand all the elements of writing they had learnt. The question I asked then was, "Is Malaysia able to compete at international sports levels?" That was when the sarcastic comment from the student was heard; Malaysia can only play marbles, beads in wooden trays and spin tops - literal translation from Malay to English, for what was written in the opening line of this story. This comment was then discussed as a class and developed into an academically written paragraph, paying heed to all the elements which they were meant to understand and cover for their upcoming test.

The whole experience signifies how important it is for the EAP teacher to seize contextual and cultural moments to truly understand their students. In having knowledge of the local culture and contexts, the teacher must be prepared to integrate with the identities and national pastimes of the people of Malaysia in order to make any progress with teaching and learning. I had to work through this 'defeat' of not being able to teach and their own feeling of hopelessness as a result of the badminton loss before progressing with the magazine exercise which I postponed to the next lesson. The students had to be allowed time to overcome their frustrations and talking it through with them helped them channel their thoughts and emotions in a way that helped them achieve a kind of emotional balance (Tripp 1993). This emotional balance helped build towards a new kind of understanding about socio-cultural conditions play out in life. In my view, it paved the way for them to think of losses that they could possibly also encounter in the real working world and in other domains of life. Lessons in life such as these provide experiential learning to cope with and graciously accept defeat; it is an important additional element to be learnt besides the cognitive or structural elements from the textbook approach in most ESL courses.

Discussion and Conclusion

The three stories highlight to what extent paying attention to socio-cultural conditions by teachers within their classrooms can help transform practice. The three stories confirm that social interaction is crucial for the improvement of teaching and learning within the EAP domain, although the type and level of interaction varied for each situation.

Story One enabled the students to grasp concepts about water shortage from an operational level to a more cultural and critical level of literacy (Green 1988) as a result of informal discussions between the teacher and the students. This ties in neatly with the understanding within the Academic Literacies paradigm that teaching and learning is a social practice. By asking the right questions, based on my readings about Popova's PELT research (2014), I was able to help the students make the link between what happened in the past and apply it within a current context. Due to the fluidity and sometimes unpredictable nature of action research as explained earlier in my methodology section, I was able to maximise learning opportunities as and when they were presented. The students were able to produce a much more cohesive and structured piece of writing.

Story Two paved the way for students to deal with personal and complex health issues and seek ways to address abuse of power, while also building on their knowledge on paraphrasing. My students were able to relate to the difficult concepts in health which were presented after discussing their personal issues in detail. It boosted their confidence and they proceeded to try difficult tasks in paraphrasing and summary writing, which was part of their bigger task in producing a complete essay. By understanding the learners' social context, I also paved the way for students to understand power relations (Abraham 2014) and how that may affect the students' learning lives, especially when making important decisions that can affect their confidence and overall sense of well-being. The interaction in this situation started on a light note but developed into a more serious discussion because it affected social issues that were treading on human rights which needed to be addressed as part of the entire educational organisational system. This finding is particularly useful in that it confirms the Academic Literacies perspective that in order for the teaching and learning of academic writing to be effective, there should be a deep understanding of power, knowledge and socio-cultural conditions as a whole. None of the conditions cannot operate on its own. The socio-cultural condition cannot be understood without being linked to power and knowledge conditions. The implication here is that such an understanding can also assist the ESL or EAP teacher to find ways to help students move from operational to critical levels of literacy (Green 1988). As illustrated in Story Two, the students could not operate critically until the cultural literacy level was addressed, although they were familiar with the operational elements or the rules of paraphrasing and summarising.

Story Three depicted a scenario where I lost control of what I had planned because of unexpected mediating circumstances which needed to be tapped into in order for the lesson to make meaning to the students. For a teacher who is undertaking action research, this awareness is crucial because it can help them develop a more heightened awareness of unexpected elements that may appear in his or her teaching. The different stages within the cyclical nature of the action research can also help the teacher become more critical of her methods of teaching and find ways to constantly improve on them. For example, Engestrom's (1987) human activity system diagram could possibly assist teachers within the reconnaissance phase of action research, in understanding how the system works and what their roles are. By asking the right questions (Popova 2014), teachers become more aware of what is going on around them and can plan according to what they know. The asking of right questions can also assist with the development of literacy levels (Green 1988) in students. The fluid nature of culture and its close link with language (Baker 2009) needs to be understood by ESL or EAP teachers to make it possible for them to seize interactional opportunities, available through culturally mediated tools in order to maximise learning outcomes. Mediation is indeed an important element in human learning and development which teachers need to

consider in their pursuit to improve practice. Knowing the cultural, social and historical dimensions of the community can aid the teacher to understand his or her students better.

However, this experiential knowledge as a result of paying close attention to socio-cultural conditions must also be complemented with the teacher's wide pedagogical repertoire that constantly needs to be strengthened with theoretical input. Therefore, the action research I undertook would have been pointless, if it was not complemented with Bill Green's literacy levels and Engestrom's human activity system theory. The balance between theory and practice is what makes it possible for teachers to become agents of change, who can transform the way EAP is taught.

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