

Bridging Theories and Practice through Research: The Malaysian experience

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Bridging theories and practice through research: The Malaysian experience brings together both theoretical and empirical papers reflecting on the vast experiences of academics researching language-related issues in the Malaysian context. This unique collection features 12 papers spanning areas of interests in Applied Linguistics, Linguistics and Literature, Engaging Technology in Teaching and Learning, with current enquiry into Second or Foreign language teaching and learning.

In bridging theories and practice in Applied Linguistics, Linguistics and Literature, Wong Bee Eng looked at the role of first language in influencing the acquisition of the English Tense and Agreement Morphology system, Sharifah Raihan contrasted the nasal final prefixes in Malay and English, Yasser Al-Shboul et.al. examined breakdown in communication in the speech act of refusals between Jordanian and Malay ESL learners, Firooz Namvar reported on the significant role that collocations play in ESL learning and Shahizah Hamdan discussed the use of critical theories as a tool to highlight the significance of popular cultures in everyday realities.

Wong Bee Eng in her paper, *Acquisition of English Tense and Agreement Morphology by L1 Malay and L1 Chinese Speakers*, reports on an inter language-related study that investigates the acquisition of English tense and agreement morphology by Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. The Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (Hawkins and Chan, 1997) was used as the framework for the study. The study gathered data from the two groups of ESL learners in an attempt to compare the role played by the Chinese and Malay languages in the acquisition process. The findings have pedagogical implications for the ESL classroom as it suggests that apparent near native-like acquisition of the L2 property might not be the case when learners seem to have more difficulty with the ungrammatical items than the grammatical items.

In *A comparative study of nasal final prefixes in Malay and English*, Sharifah Raihan Syed Jaafar provides a contrastive analysis of the nasal final prefixes in two languages, namely Malay and English. She contends that as nasal and voiceless obstruent clusters are not allowed to emerge in the surface representation, the occurrence of such clusters in Malay and English is resolved through the use of repair strategies such as nasal assimilation, nasal deletion, nasalisation, nasal substitution, denasalisation and post-nasal voicing. This is explained through the use of constraint-based theory named Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky, 1993).

Yasser Al-Shboul et. al. in their paper *Intercultural Study of Refusal Strategies in English between Jordanian and Malay EFL Learners* examine the speech act of refusals in intercultural communication. They argue that differences in cultural background might cause misunderstanding or communication breakdowns when people from different cultural backgrounds come in contact with each other. Similarities and differences of the speech act of refusals in English between Jordanian and Malay EFL learners were investigated based on the contention that both groups of learners may exhibit similarities and differences due to the different levels of pragmatic competence. Data were collected using a modified version of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) initially developed by Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990). Results showed that both groups used almost similar strategies with similar frequency in performing refusals and the fact that speech acts reflect the cultural norms and values that are possessed by speakers of different cultural backgrounds.

Firooz Namvar in *Using collocations as a way of achieving near native language proficiency*, looked at the significant role that collocation has in second language learning particularly in improving learner's language skills. He investigated learners' errors in the use of collocations by analyzing the learners' written work based on multiple choice tests and a writing task. Results showed that learners had difficulties with both lexical and grammatical collocations in their writing. It also appeared that the use of collocations is related to proficiency in English and there is a strong relationship between knowledge of collocations and the overall proficiency.

In the paper *Producing/Reproducing Ideology: Unearthing Multiple Perspectives on Literature and Popular Culture*, Shahizah Ismail Hamdan looked at how critical theories can be used to examine popular culture within everyday realities. In one of the courses offered in the MA Postcolonial Literature in English program 'Literature and Popular Culture' offered at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, The National University of Malaysia, various popular literary genres were examined and students were trained to see the significance of popular culture within everyday realities using rhetorical methods as well as critical theories. She focuses on how understanding "ideology" can be an intervention method into unearthing multiple meanings in literature and popular culture.

In bridging theories and practice in the section on *Engaging technology in teaching and learning*, the three papers examined the engagement of technology in teaching and learning practices and proposed how technology can support teachers and learners in the classroom. The arrival of social networking sites (SNSs) has also sparked interest and debate on how these sites offer an extensive repertoire of language use. Pedagogical assumptions which underlie the design of information technology for educational purpose must be understood in order to establish the role of technology as tools to supplement and enhance teaching and learning process. The potential for these tools should not merely shape the pedagogical outcomes, rather the pedagogical outcomes should also define the 'affordances' offered by these tools (McLoughlin and Lee, 2008) because every learner has different learning aims and needs (Kirschner, 2002). Hayati and Rozina, Ng Shi Ing et. al. and Zailin et. al. shared their Malaysian experience in engaging technology in the teaching and learning process.

Hayati Idris and Rozina Abdul Ghani in *Construction of knowledge on facebook* explored how SNS, in particular, Facebook (FB, henceforth) can be used as tool in the learning process and construction of knowledge. Their study, constructed within the Social Constructivism theory is based on the perspective that SNS can promote social interaction between individuals, besides supporting active learning, social learning and construction of knowledge. The patterns of language use and the extent of knowledge construction in the FB discourse was analysed using the Indicators of Construction of Knowledge (Pena-Pérez, 2000). The findings showed that majority of the participants wrote in English, a finding which supports the claim that SNS platform such as FB can be used as an additional platform in terms of English language use. The users discussed a wide range of ideas, issues and facts that are related to their daily social experiences, using mostly clarification, interpretation, question, assertion and support type of statements. These forms of statement support the claim that FB users are engaged in a social interaction that relates to construction of knowledge. The findings also revealed that responses given to the postings by others were in the form of elaboration or agreement, instead of debating on the topics or issues. The writer asserts that the interaction shown by the respondents are the required behaviours in the quest of knowledge which also contributes to life-long learning.

In *Digitally engendering soft skills through Stixy – A Web-based bulletin board*, Ng Shi Ing et.al. argue that soft skills which is lacking among local graduates can be developed using Web 2.0 tools. The present study, thus, investigated the efficacy and the extent to

which a web-based bulletin board, Stixy, can be employed as a platform to inculcate soft skills through collaborative knowledge building. Stixy was used as an online discussion board for the respondents to discuss ideas in creating a poster for an English Language literature assignment. Data were gathered using questionnaire, focus-group, interviews and reflective journals. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively using mean and standard deviation, while qualitative data were content analysed discursively based on Soeller's (2001) Collaborative Learning Conversation Skills Taxonomy (CLCS). Findings indicate that Stixy has succeeded in promoting soft skills through collaborative knowledge building and was adopted favorably by the pre-service teachers. The results of the study have convinced the writers on the need to continue exploring and incorporating web 2.0 tools into the learning environment in order to support soft skills development.

In *Investigating students' perception of using wikis in academic writing course*, Zailin et. al. claim that web-based authoring tools are useful for engaging learners in collaborative writing work. This study sets out to investigate students' perception of using wikis for collaborative writing; a web-based free authoring tool which allow users to edit or modify the contents. The lecturers had their own wiki, referred to as the *anchor wiki*, which function as the course management system. The students used wikis to write, revise and submit their group research reports. Findings indicate that majority of students considered wikis to be very useful as they can do group writing without being constrained to the class hours. The students also reported that wikis were useful for data storage and group work task completion. The three wiki functions most frequently used by the students were the *Edit page*, *Manage Wiki* and *My Wikis*. Nevertheless, the students reported that face-to-face discussion for collaborative writing worked better because they felt that discussions via wikis were not as effective or productive as discussions and collaboration in a face-to-face mode. The writers concluded that despite technical hiccups and students' preference for face-to-face mode in group writing, the functions offered through the various wiki functions are facilitative, particularly for easy monitoring and easy access to groups' written work.

The next section Bridging theories and practice in teaching and learning and pedagogical related issues' is explored by Wong Fook Fei et. al., focusing on material evaluation among language instructors, Sarjit et. al explored new challenges in the teaching of ESL writing using the Multiliteracies approach, Nor Fariza et. al. researched ESL writing strategies among postgraduates and finally, Chan Swee Heng et. al. examined the possibility of construct of 'anxiety' and its subconstructs in determining success in language learning, particularly in the enhancement of speaking skill.

Wong Fook Fei et. al. in their paper *A blended approach in teaching an EAP course: Malaysian instructors' perceptions of the new course materials* examined instructors' perception of the new course materials that comprises a course book and online practice reinforcement activities that were used to teach an undergraduate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course for Social Sciences at a Malaysian public university. Two main concerns were raised arising from the results of the study. The first was regarding the difficulty level of the reading comprehension activities in the course book was less challenging for students. The second was slow internet connectivity to the online practice website which the instructors felt was unable to support the students efficiently in their activities.

In *Designing learning elements using the Multiliteracies Approach in an ESL writing classroom*, Sarjit Kaur et. al. assert that the employment of technology in teaching literacy has fundamentally change students' learning process in the ESL classroom. Students are not only engaged in technology but are also dealing with an array of communication channels and social networking. As a result, teachers have to deal with new pedagogical challenges. This study adopts the Multiliteracies approach (henceforth, MILTA) as a framework in order

to examine the effectiveness of ESL teaching of writing among 37 Chinese students in a secondary school in Penang. Three senior teachers were also involved as respondents. Interviews and classroom observations were used as research instruments for data collection. The findings showed that the ESL teachers have positive perceptions to the collaborative activities which integrated ICTs and other multimedia in their teaching. The students also responded positively to MLITA approach. The writers claim that MLITA can be employed as a basis for teachers in terms of incorporating it in the current exam-oriented writing system which is vital to promote students' engagement and creativity and thus positively impact their learning outcomes. The paper ends with the view that it is essential for teachers to understand that students can work in a flexible manner using the MLITA concept.

Nor Fariza et. al. in *Composing Strategies of international postgraduate students' writings* examined written work of five postgraduate students from the Middle East, who are enrolled for a Masters course. The data collection procedures involved analysis of the students' written work and interviews. The present study used several taxonomies of ESL writing strategies in order to investigate and understand the students' conceptualization of their writing tasks. Findings revealed that the postgraduates employed several composing writing strategies in order to help them work with, think about and manipulate the materials required in order to do the writing task. The writing process was also interactive as students used and built upon their previous knowledge, skills and strategies in writing.

Chan Swee Heng et. al. in their paper *Defining the construct of anxiety in relation to speaking skills among ESL tertiary learners* investigated dimensions of language anxiety alongside the constructs of communication apprehension, text anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in relation to speaking skills. 700 higher education students completed a survey questionnaire administered to them prior to an oral communication test. Findings suggest that most of the students experienced a medium level of oral communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The authors suggested that teachers learn to identify anxiety and be able to enhance facilitating anxiety while reducing the negative as in the process of acquiring the oral skill, anxiety forms an important element that could determine communicative competence and ultimately, language learning success.

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