

## Examining English Teacher Professionalism through Dialogic Narrative Inquiry: A Case from Sabah, Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

*This study reports the examination of the professionalism of a local English teacher in Sabah, Malaysia, through dialogic narrative inquiry. The purpose of this examination is to understand ways in which professionalism of a local English teacher in a setting where English is minimally spoken is enacted in light of different social entities and objects, as well as prescriptive expectations. Narratives from the teacher, Misha, concerning her teaching were collected over seven months. Subsequently, the narratives were restoried by the researcher and Misha over four months, resulting in narrative constellations which described variables that affected Misha professionally. The constellations are Misha's self, her students, her colleagues and the English Teaching Assistant, as well as the prescribed materials and pedagogy. The findings support the notion that teacher professionalism is a dynamic and multi-faceted construct. Furthermore, the study provides an avenue for the legitimization of an English language teacher through thoughts and actions reflected through narratives.*

*Keywords: Local English teacher; dialogic narrative inquiry; narrative constellation; teacher professionalism; teacher identity*

### INTRODUCTION

While studies regarding local English teachers' professionalism have increased, they remain subject to the discourses of inequality (Kubota & Lin 2006, Jeon 2009, Selvi 2014, Rudolph, Selvi & Yazan 2015). This stems from the long-standing interest in distinguishing local and non-local English teachers (cf. native English speaking teachers) which is prone to displace local English teachers as being deficient in English language skills and knowledge, or ineffective English language teachers (see Selvi 2014). Furthermore, little attention has been paid to local teachers' professionalism taken in light of conflicts brought in through the arrival of non-local teachers, materials, or pedagogical principles from countries where English is the primary language. This has led to a very narrow understanding of the professionalism of local English teachers, especially those in EFL contexts (Young & Walsh 2010). Nonetheless, from various studies on local English teachers, it has been argued that they are capable of pedagogical approaches suitable for their students and working parameters (e.g., Hayes 2010b). These capabilities, albeit reflected through research, signify local English teachers' professionalism, which is indicative of their 'potential for thinking otherwise' – a call Kumaravadivelu (2016) made to urge non-local English teachers and scholars to stand up against hegemonic discourses prevalent in English language education, that is, the idea that English is only teachable by those from an English speaking country, or those with the characteristics common to a native English speaking person (see also Kubota & Lin 2006). To address the issue of inequality and to illustrate the professionalism of local English teachers, this study will take a dialogical approach to examine the professionalism of a local English teacher working in a rural area in Sabah, Malaysia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### NON-LOCAL ENGLISH TEACHERS' PROFESSIONALISM

In this section, I will discuss the conceptualization of teacher professionalism, its value, and the means of examining professionalism. It has been established and accepted that teacher professionalism is complex and dynamic, involving multiple variables and contextual constraints. Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000), in their exploratory study on English teachers' notion of professional identity, suggested that professional identity is comprised of the following concepts: subject matter expert, which is one's knowledge and skills about the subject matter; pedagogical expert, which is one who understands the nature of teaching and learning through the recognition of affective and moral aspects influencing students' lives; and didactical expert, which refers to one who is able to plan, carry out, evaluate and reflect upon teaching and learning processes. While these concepts may be integral for the construction of an English teacher's professional identity, they may be perceived differently in various cultural contexts. Other variables may also affect these concepts, such as teachers' preparation programs, teaching experiences and their socio-historical backgrounds (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt 2000, Flores & Day 2006, Beauchamp & Thomas 2009).

Aside from conceptions that revolve around the self, teacher professionalism is also shaped by relations with external entities. This may be seen through teachers' trajectories in light of a community of practice or even changes in an educational setting. For example, Trent's (2012) study on both local and non-local English teachers in Hong Kong illustrated how professionalism may be formed based on accepted and expected pedagogical principles, or the relations held between teachers with their supervisors, students, colleagues, or other entities such as the curriculum. Another example can be seen in Liu and Xu's (2013) study on Feng, a Chinese who is a new English teacher, who experienced competing identities to accommodate the growing interest in communicative approaches to English language education. Feng also experienced a complex interaction with her colleagues and the larger community of English teachers, wherein there was a recurring construction and reconstruction of identity. What can be seen from the conceptualization of English teaching professionalism from scholars as well as experiences of English language teachers aligns with Vu's (2014) argument, in that professionalism "is a process rather than a product, and the interplay of the shaping elements (the move of the objects in the kaleidoscope) is decided by the perspectives and logics of the stakeholders involved" (p. 154).

### VALUE IN THE STUDY OF TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM

The study of teacher professionalism is valuable as it illustrates the complex nature of teaching and being a teacher. The complexity may be evident when teachers are situated within a context where their personal beliefs and practices may be challenged at the micro-level by social entities, such as their students or colleagues (see Liu & Xu 2011, Trent 2012, Phan 2018) or at the macro-level through circumstantial factors, such as educational discourses and reforms (see Tsui 2007). From the examination of such a context, insights into how English teachers are professionally positioned within their teaching setting are provided. Given that most identity studies have taken a postmodern approach to examining English language teachers, potential positionings have been varied. This acknowledges that identities are not made up of static attributes; instead, they reflect a teacher's interaction with his or her circumstances, or pertinent social entities with whom he or she comes into contact. Furthermore, this interaction need not be with external factors – it can also be found within

the teacher's selves, as exemplified in the studies of Liu and Xu (2011), Tsui (2007), or Johnston (2003).

As discussed earlier, with hegemonic discourses regarding English language teachers, it is expected that local English teachers will continuously struggle to ensure that their pedagogical principles and practices remain relevant to their context. It is common, then, that conflicts would have emerged through the examination of local English teachers' identities through discourse. For example, Liu and Xu's (2011) examination of Hui's narrative discovered conflicts stemming from competing discourses – hegemonic discourses about how English language education should be student-centred, communicative and interactive with the local sociocultural discourses. Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out that 'new work orders' do not only affect local English teachers, but also those who are non-local. Finding themselves in a culturally different context may cause contradictions with their belief system or practices, as reported by Loo, Trakulkasemsuk and Jimarkon Zilli (2017). Moreover, the study of professional identity "involves not just being given legitimate access to practice but also legitimating one's access to practice as well as legitimating reifications" (Tsui 2007, p. 678). Accounting for teachers' experiences, and showing how these experiences matter through scholarly dissemination, as well as involving participants in examining the meaningfulness of these experiences, are all ways in which a teacher's position may be legitimised. Thus, studying English language teachers in context will not only deepen our understanding of issues pertinent to English teacher development and English language education in a particular locality, it will also provide insights into the position of English teachers in the broader educational challenges and aspiration of the wider region (see Liu & Xu 2011). From these experiences, there may be snapshots of how local English teachers "resist a monolithic presentation of legitimate or 'correct' English" and "English speaker" (Aneja 2016, p. 591).

#### THE STUDY OF TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM

A common approach employed in the past decades has been narrative inquiry. This approach has been deemed appropriate because it can capture the complexities common to a narrative (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson 2005, Barkhuizen 2011, Kayi-Aydar 2015). The way in which 'narrative' is conceived has also taken up different paths. As discussed by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), narratives about identities do not necessarily have to come from big, long, extended stories; instead, they can be examined from 'local interactive practices' that may seem 'small', but are crucial snippets of one's identity as it reveals "inconsistencies, contradictions, moments of trouble and tension, and the teller's constant navigation and finessing between different versions of selfhood in local contexts" (p. 16). This brings to the forefront two considerations to make when conducting a narrative study. First, it reifies the notion of fluidity in one's identity. As such, teachers' narratives can be constructed through interviews (e.g., Trent 2016), or reflective journals (e.g., Kayi-Aydar 2015). In some studies, other types of data have been used to supplement teachers' narratives, such as observations of teachers (in their classroom teaching or at their workplace) and even interviews with social entities relevant to teachers, such as students or co-teachers (see Creese 2002 Sosa & Gomez 2012). This leads to the different ways in which narrative inquiry can be presented, for instance, as narrative portraits (e.g., Aneja 2016), narrative snapshots (e.g., Park 2014), or story constellations (e.g., Craig 2007). These types of narrative are essentially similar to Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) conceptualization of small stories. There are also narratives which represent an ethnographic approach study, wherein data was collected from various sources over an extended period of time (e.g., Hayes

2010a). That said, narratives can also be constructed based on an interactive dialogue, or interview (e.g., Kayi-Aydar 2015).

Second, this has allowed researcher space to determine the number of participants based on the purpose of a research study and the instances or period for data collection. This can be seen in the varied number of participants involved in published narrative studies. This is illustrated in the table below.

TABLE 1. Number of Participants involved in Narrative Studies

Number of Participant(s)	Study Topic	Researcher(s); Year of Publication
1	A new English teachers' perception towards pedagogy that is contextually driven and the ideals endorsed by higher bodies	Liu & Xu (2011)
1	How the teaching of English influences the understanding of intercultural communication	Gandana & Parr (2013)
3	Pre-service English teachers' perception of agency and how they are positioned, and their English language learners	Kayi-Aydar (2015)
6	Positioning of private English language tutors	Trent (2016)
2	Challenges of pre-service English teachers in securing an English teaching job	Chang (2018)

Another recent observation concerning narrative studies is how researchers have been urged to be invisible in the examination of professional identities of other teachers. This is because researchers themselves may bring biases into the context of study. Being aware of these potential biases and examining how they may affect the research will support the credibility of the study (Berger 2015). Aside from the researchers, participants themselves are encouraged to be involved in the meaning-making process of narratives, which can be done through collaborations through participant check in a restorying process. This process involves the researcher reading a narrative, understanding it and then retelling it. Understanding and retelling stories may include the participants (see Liu & Xu 2011 or Ollerenshaw & Creswell 2002).

## THE STUDY

### PARTICIPANT AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The local English teacher involved in this study is Misha (pseudonym). At the time of the research, Misha had been working at the school for 7 years. Misha graduated with a Bachelor's in Music Education, and a minor in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) from a public teacher education university in Malaysia. Misha's colleagues also completed teacher education colleges or programs. A majority of them are from the district, and all of them are from Sabah. Misha taught two secondary 2 classes, whose students are between 14-15 years old.

This study was carried out at a public boarding school located in a district northeast of Sabah, Malaysia. The school offers both primary and secondary education. All teaching and learning materials were those assigned by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE). At this school, English materials consisted of a textbook with a corresponding workbook. The English language materials were developed by a foreign press from the United Kingdom, but published locally. The materials were deemed relevant to the recent educational reform for both the primary and secondary level. In this reform, English language is to be taught communicatively, and a language arts component is included. This component comprises of phonics, penmanship, and literature. Project based learning is the recommended pedagogical

approach for language arts, based on the notion that this approach reflects authentic use of English (Othman, Salleh & Norani 2013, Ahmad & Juin 2014, Mihat 2015). An examination of the materials affirmed these approaches. Nonetheless, though materials for teaching and learning were provided, materials for assessment were developed by the teachers themselves, based on past assessment papers, as well as existing materials endorsed by the MoE.

The class sizes at Misha's school ranged from 30 to 40 students. Since the school is a public school for the district, most of the students come from surrounding communities. Almost all of them stayed at school, where they spent half a day taking classes and the remaining day participating in extracurricular activities or study groups. For most of these students, they are the first in the family who will most likely complete a secondary school education, with a handful proceeding on to complete tertiary studies. The families of these students are farmers/farm owners or business owners. The district where the school is located is well-known for its farm produce and seafood, and more recently, eco-tourism, which attracts many English-speaking tourists (Hussin, Kunjuraman & Weirowski 2015).

#### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This study employed a dialogic narrative inquiry approach to examine Misha's professional identity. The dialogic approach is valuable to the current study as it takes into account the subjectivities of the teacher. Narrative inquiry, on the other hand, is valuable as it provides a space for Misha to share and make sense of her experiences. Furthermore, narrative inquiry may delve into beliefs or attitudes which may not be overt (Bell 2002). A dialogic approach recognises that teachers operate differently in different circumstances. It also affirms instances where identities contradict; hence, relying on a single attribute may be problematic. Because a dialogic approach takes into account the multiplicity of one's identity, it places value of the voices involved in the dialogic exchange, even those who are not present in the discursive event, "[t]his shows how others literally become part of the way we speak and act" (Akkerman & Meijer 2011, p. 314).

Narrative data for this study was collected over seven months (July 2017 to January 2018). Misha's narratives were written and kept in a single word file on Google Documents, to which we both had access. There were 14 narratives in total (an average of two narratives a month). At the beginning of the data collection period, I provided Misha with narrative prompts. These prompts were open-ended, asking Misha to describe the classes she taught and her work context. From this, follow-up prompts were provided, asking Misha to elaborate upon what she had shared. While Misha's narrative expanded iteratively, Misha and I would revisit past narratives as part of the restorying process (18 of such interactions) over four months, which was the rewriting of Misha's narratives. During this process, I also met with Misha twice – once in December 2017 and in March 2018. These meetings were organised to check and consolidate the restoried narratives. Between February to May 2018, as I was writing this paper, I exchanged emails and texts with Misha to ensure that the restorying narratives reflected Misha's subjectivity. I also met with Misha one more time in May 2018 as the paper was being finalised.

The restorying process was done at two analytical phases, micro- and macro-analysis, as suggested by Akkerman and Meijer (2011). Though the presence of a researcher will muddle the narratives of the participant, given that the researcher is relying on personal subjectivity to gain understanding (Barkhuizen 2011), we believe that our collaboration will provide a more encompassing grasp of the research issue. While the micro-analysis refers to how the teacher dealt with different social entities and contexts (e.g., self, students, colleagues, co-teachers of the same subject, etc.), the macro-analysis takes into account the teachers' narratives in light of broader issues pertinent to ELT. The different aims of the two

phases helped us encapsulate major themes found in the narratives, as well as to understand the narratives' complexities and dynamics. These themes were organised in narrative constellations, whose strengths "are its sensitivity to both teachers' developing knowledge and schools' shifting contexts and the way the approach enables researchers to follow where an unfolding story may lead" (Craig 2007, p. 186).

#### RESEARCHER POSITION

The idea for this research was conceived after a conversation I had with Misha in the early part of 2017. Misha had confided in me about an incoming English teaching assistant (ETA) from the USA and the potential issues in housing an ETA for a year. When asked about the purpose of the ETA, Misha said that it was to offer 'authentic' English in the school environment. This was a surprise for me, because how English is spoken in the USA is not authentic to the context of Misha and her students. This sparked my interest in working with Misha in examining her professionalism to counter the hegemonic discourse that entities, whether ideologies or persons, from English-speaking countries are better. With English teaching experiences in Australia, Thailand, and Singapore, I have encountered numerous instances where doubt was cast upon my professionalism. What I hope, then, through Misha's narratives, is to provide a space for recognition for English teachers from the global south (see Goodson 1990, Hickey 2018). Furthermore, as a researcher in English language education, I believe in the value of giving voice to local English teachers, or teachers of any subject, who have invested time, effort, and money in preparing themselves to meet the educational needs of the community and aspirations of the region, and the criteria and requirements to teach.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### MISHA'S SELF

Through Misha's narratives and the restorying process, multiple themes related to self and other social entities or objects became apparent. This illustrates the dialogic nature of a teacher's professionalism, wherein different positions may be assumed when operating in different contexts or dealing with different social entities. This section will feature constellations as a result of the restoried narratives of Misha, which are self, her students, colleagues and school, as well as the teaching approaches and materials. These constellations are derived from the micro-analysis of Misha's narratives.

Let us first consider Misha's positioning of herself. Earlier, I briefly described Misha's professional background. To add, Misha grew up in a setting where English was a dominant tool for communication. This community, which included a school, was set up by Christian missionaries in the early 1900s. For many years, the medium of communication was English, even after the educational reform in Malaysia in the 80s that saw the shift of English to Bahasa Malaysia (BM) (Lee 1999). Even after BM was made the language of instruction, the school and the surrounding community continued to be known for high English proficiency. Misha's parents and Misha completed their primary and secondary education in this community. In Misha's home, English was used, likewise in Misha's social circles. Misha was also a keen observer and consumer of English language mass media and pop culture. While English usage was prevalent in her day-to-day dealings, borrowing and code-switching with BM was also common, where terms or slangs, or phrases would be used to make references to local concepts.

Misha's early exposure to English and the continued use of the English language shaped Misha's personal positioning as a highly proficient English user. This is further supported by Misha's familiarity with cultural references from English speaking countries through popular music, movies, TV shows, and books. Misha shared an incident, "When I was in primary three, the teacher said the word 'bus', but she said it incorrectly. She said [bʊs] instead of [bʌs]. I started laughing and corrected the teacher. I think the teacher was not very happy with me that day."

In secondary school, Misha mentioned that there was a sense of privilege attached to the ability to use English. Those who were proficient in English were thought of as being modern and cosmopolitan. "Being able to use English really made you stand apart from the rest. But I would not say that it made us arrogant or anything like that. I think it actually helped other classmates to want to improve their English." Aside from the positive perception towards English, there were also other experiences which supported her use and interest in English, such as the school newsletter, which published short stories or comic strips penned by students, as well as extra-curricular activities, which were conducted in English.

Nonetheless, Misha's positive disposition towards English was problematised when she began her work as an English teacher. Misha stated that it had never occurred to her that language learning could be a difficult feat. "I've heard about people struggling with the language, but I have never experienced it first-hand. It really is an eye-opener for me to see what my students go through in the classroom."

#### MISHA'S STUDENTS

The students' circumstances were starkly different from Misha's. Misha's students did not grow up in an English speaking environment. In the student's community, Malay, Bajau, and Kadazandusun are the main languages used for communication. Though the district had seen an influx in tourists over the years, the local community did not have to invest in learning any new language because these tourists were brought around with a local guide/interpreter. Misha admitted that because English was not the dominant language spoken, students had no motivation to learn it seriously. Misha added,

Perhaps another reason why there is no clear interest in learning the language is because the students' parents are not supportive of the English language. If I suggest English novels or short stories to the students, they will come back to tell me that their parents don't have the money. But this is not the case with other subjects, like science or mathematics.

It was mentioned earlier that in the community where Misha grew up, it was considered a privilege to be able to converse well in English. Unfortunately, this was not the case in the context where Misha was teaching. While the general student population had a low proficiency in English, there were those whose English proficiency was quite good.

There are some students whose English proficiency is quite good. I can actually converse with them without problems in English. But they say they are uncomfortable when made to contribute in front of their other classmates. Here, students pick on those who speak fluent English because they think these students are showing off.

While Misha's students were only at the secondary level, they were discerning of the status of English. Some of the students were aware that high English proficiency in their community may not be of any social use. For instance, Misha recalled a conversation she had with a fellow student, "the Kadazandusun language is important because that is the language that their parents speak. It is also their identity." Misha responded to the student, "if you ever

consider yourself going abroad, English will be very important because it is a universal language”, to which the student responded, “that may be true, but I see myself remaining here with my family and I would be more interested to do something that will benefit what I do here”.

Considering Misha’s familiarity with the situation of her students and the sociolinguistic situation of the district, Misha did not have high hopes for her students to be inclined to be communicative in English. This resulted in Misha working on helping her students learn language and test-taking skills which would help them pass the national examinations.

#### EFFORTS BY THE TEACHING CONTEXT

To address students’ low English proficiency, Misha’s school had put forth effort to support English education. Nonetheless, Misha was not sure if her school was genuinely invested in the students’ English language development because “I feel that sometimes the school is too concerned over the standards and KPIs”. There were several examples that Misha provided. For instance, Misha mentioned,

The school did provide English textbooks for the students. The funny thing was, my students were not allowed to write anything or take notes in these books. This made things impossible, especially because the school did not provide students with workbooks. I had to order the workbook on my own from the supplier, and they didn’t come on time. There are still some students who owe me for the workbook. It’s RM (Ringgit Malaysia) 8.60.

In another instance, Misha wrote,

One of the activities organised by the English teachers and supported by the school is the English assembly, held on Tuesdays before the first class in the morning. This is an optional event where students from different classes do poetry reading, tell short stories, sing English songs, and participate in English dialogue. However, since this assembly is optional, very few attend. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to get the teachers involved as they need time to prepare for their first class of the day.

Aside from the English Assembly, there was also a dedicated bulletin board prepared for English language materials. On the board, there were pictures of past English activities; there were also materials which are changed regularly, such as word of the week, grammar items, English sayings and expressions, and short stories. However, Misha wrote that the bulletin board was hard to maintain, and it was subject to regular vandalism.

Misha also mentioned that there was an English Access room which houses English reading materials and equipment to support English communicative activities. Misha wrote, “It is ironic that we have the room because it is called an English Access room but it is inaccessible. I have never been in that room myself because the head of the English Panel did not make it available for use.” From these different stories, it appeared that while resources were made available and activities put in place, how these were used was not necessarily utilised well to support the students’ language development.

#### MISHA’S COLLEAGUES AND THE ENGLISH TEACHING ASSISTANT

On top of the lack of support from the school, Misha also felt that her other English teacher colleagues did not invest enough time and effort in helping the students improve their English language proficiency. An issue that Misha pointed out is the lack in a sense of community between English teachers. Misha wrote,



As English teachers, we rarely get together. We only meet when there is a school-wide English activity, or when our coordinator is finalizing an exam for a class level. This is a problem because we are supposed to do things similarly, to move at the same pace. But then, for example, when we get together to discuss a final exam, we are never on the same page. It is also a little unfair, and probably frustrating, because the English coordinator will always have the final say in the exam content.

Misha also mentioned that her colleagues emulate the school's bureaucratic concerns, she wrote,

I feel that I am the only one pushing for English activities to be organised or to be approved by the school administration. My colleagues are concerned too, but it's different. They are more interested in whether or not performance markers are met. Maybe it's because I am relatively new to this school setting and the teaching profession. I still do believe that teaching students, whatever the subject, should be done with the intention of giving something useful to our students.

Misha's position of herself within the community of English teachers was further problematised by the presence of an English Teaching Assistant (ETA). Misha's school was one of the many schools in Malaysia to receive an ETA. The ETA was responsible for providing teaching assistance to the local English teachers, to be a communicative resource for the students, and to initiate English activities. Nonetheless, throughout the academic year, Misha and her colleagues became uncertain of the ETA's role. This problem was observed in several instances narrated by Misha. For example, an English camp was typically organised to give students an English immersion experience. However, the ETA replaced the English Camp with other activities, visiting a mangrove, hosting fitness classes, and climbing Mount Kinabalu. Though these activities aim to use English in different settings, students who participated reported that Malay was the main mode of communication. Furthermore, only a handful of students were involved in these activities.

Our ETA conducted some activities, such as a yoga class, but they lasted only for 3 months. They didn't continue through the semester. Our ETA did organise a program that involved all the teachers and students, which is a 'gotong-royong' (cleaning together) day and a recycling project of old tires and plastic bottles. However, at the beginning of this semester (2<sup>nd</sup> semester), no activities had been done by the ETA yet.

Though the placement of an ETA in Misha's school may not be supportive of students' language development, it did not hinder Misha and her colleagues from organizing other English activities. Misha wrote,

Last semester our English Panel organised some activities to give the students, as well as teachers, the opportunities to learn and use English outside the classroom. The activities were Amazing Race, 'Sing in English' Singing Competition, public speaking, Scrabble competition, English drama, poetry recitation and choral speaking.

While Misha and her colleagues did resolve to provide English extra-curricular activities to their students, there were some traits of the ETA that were found to be helpful. For instance, Misha noted that the ETA had certain performative styles that would appeal to the students, and that would be of personal and professional value (see Appleby 2013). One of such traits was the ETA's interest in learning about the local language and the culture, which garnered students' attention. Misha narrated, "I've spoken to a student who participated in one of the activities. She actually enjoyed it because it was not done in school. They went for an introduction course to scuba diving. She commented that the ETA was friendly, helpful, kind, adventurous and loved learning Malay. She added that during class,

the ETA was able to do a little translation from English to Malay, which made the students happy and more confident to interact with the ETA.”

Another problem that Misha highlighted was that the activities that the ETA conducted were quite exclusive. She wrote, “Those who are not selected to join the activities will feel left out and not motivated because only those good in English or close with the ETA will be chosen.”

#### PROVIDING RELEVANT MATERIALS AND DELIVERY

While Misha grew up speaking English, she still felt that she did not have enough pedagogical competencies to teach English. Furthermore, Misha believed that the materials assigned to schools by the MOE were not relevant to the context of her students. “Materials need to be modified to suit the language level of my students. I also need to think about what my students know and don’t know. It will be very hard if my students encounter unfamiliar content or topics used to convey language lessons.”

Misha further elaborated,

Because my students aren’t good with the English language, I’m sad to say that most of the lessons are very teacher-centred. There is also almost no opportunity for something interesting to happen. What I mean is that lessons are normally very straightforward. I begin with an introduction, followed by a task, and sometimes I will conclude with a summary of the lesson. This gets really boring and dry after a while. I remember in my own English class when I was a student, there was always an interaction between the students and the teacher. Sometimes we will go off course and talk about something that was not part of the lesson. I have never experienced that here with my students. It’s their low language skills, and probably their interest in the topic is very low.

While certain types of activities may not be possible, Misha tried to work with other approaches. For example, integrating kinaesthetic learning.

Some lessons I can make interesting. For example, there is one lesson about skin care. What I did was to start with an instruction – put your hands on your face, and rub your face gently, what do you feel.” Even when students are unable to respond in English, Misha welcomes participation even in Malay. “...the students responded in Malay. This was still good enough for me though, because at least I know they understand what’s going on. Sometimes I would also code-switch if the lesson is too technical or it is about a topic they are not familiar with.

The use of BM was a common pedagogical approach in Misha’s class. It was used to translate English texts to facilitate students’ understanding of meaning.

So yeah, the students do a lot of translation in the English class. Every semester there are literary texts that the students need to learn. What we normally do is we translate a short paragraph or a section of the text. The paragraphs are split among different groups in class. I’ll let them use the dictionary and they can discuss the correctness of the translation. I’ll look at it later and correct anything necessary. After that we will transfer the translations on a big piece of cardboard, and compile all the translated parts into a huge book. We call this the ‘Big Book Project’. This will be the students’ resource book for a particular piece of literary text. Even though the stories are translated, I know that the students themselves may not understand what was translated. That is why even after the translation is done, I will still have to talk about the stories to make sure that the implicit meanings found in the text are understood. A small section or a paragraph normally will take two sittings.

Though changes to materials and pedagogy were necessary and accepted, Misha recognised that they were bound to certain limits, “because the education inspector will come to check our compliance”. Misha was also aware of the greater issue that is affecting the

English education landscape in Malaysia. Misha expressed, “there is a mismatch between what we teach in class and how the students are assessed. This is partly the fault of the teachers and the curriculum expectations. For example, we emphasise communicative skills, to meet the expectations of the CEFR; however, there is always a heavy focus on reading and writing, and not listening and speaking.”

While Misha attempted to adhere to the assigned syllabus, she enjoyed other forms of English pedagogical approaches as well. Misha wrote,

As an English teacher, I have enjoyed helping my students learn English through drama. I have helped my students through drama. We were representing schools from the northern zone of Sabah to join the state level drama competition. While we did not win, I felt that this was a good way to show that my students that being competent in English is possible.

Aside from drama, Misha also supported her students’ English language development through technological platforms such as messaging applications. To encourage English writing out-of-class, Misha gave her students the opportunity to write short stories to her. These stories could be of any genre – horror or even a dialogue. This initiative was inspired not only from her secondary school experience, but also from a story she read from the syllabus about an English learner who was able to earn money by writing stories shared through a messaging application.

## IMPLICATIONS

Having examined Misha at the micro-level (i.e., Misha’s self against social entities such as her students and colleagues, and objects such as the curriculum and pedagogical approaches), this paper will conclude with several issues pertinent to the macro perspective of ELT. This step considers narratives in light of the broader landscape of English language education. From Misha’s narratives, there were social entities that instigated tensions for Misha professional identity. One in particular was her students, whose lack of language proficiency and interest may have exacerbated Misha’s professional position as an English teacher. An observation from this is the political nature of language. Pennycook (2013), in his discussion about the language policies in Malaysia, stated that in the formative years of the nation, English was considered a marker of privilege and elitism. Its removal from the educational system in the 80s was aimed at elevating the status of BM, as well as those who speak it proficiently. Nonetheless, as observed from the teaching context of Misha, elitism is still ascribed to the language (e.g., students who are proficient in English not wanting to come across as a show off). This is complicated by the preference for practicality and the stronger affinity for local languages as an identity marker, as well as a communicative tool for their livelihood (i.e., BM, Bajau, and Kadazandusun).

Misha’s relationship with her colleagues was also problematic as they did not move in one accord. Misha was also uncertain if the higher bodies were supportive of the development of English language proficiency, as the type of materials assigned did not meet the needs of the students. Furthermore, the presence of an ETA seemed redundant in Misha’s context (for another example in the Malaysian context, see Senom, Othman & Siraj 2016). Misha’s professionalism, though, became apparent through the local contextualization of materials and pedagogical approaches to address the needs of the local setting. It also guided her decision of her communication mode (i.e., the use of Malay or code-mixing, see Butler 2004). What is observed here is how materials and approaches promoted by the government and the powerful centre are transformed by a ‘native’ of the teaching context (see Hayes 2010b). Though she may be diverging away from the popular discourses of English education

(e.g., communicative approach, student-centred), what Misha accomplished was to provide English language learning experiences that are contextualised to the local setting (see Hayes 2010b, Young & Walsh 2010). This is in line with what is observed in literature on ELT professionalism, as argued by Vu (2014), wherein professionalism in ELT is does not necessarily refer to the traits that teachers should have, but on the value placed on the complex nature of interaction with the teaching setting and other social entities. This is also indicative of the lack of a sense of belongingness. Perhaps this is what is argued by MacDonald and Weller (2017), in that the role of a teacher has been redefined. Teachers, in improving their pedagogical craft, are traveling through a personal journey. While there may be milestones where a community becomes present (e.g. sharing findings from his or her action research at a conference, discussing with colleagues at a meeting, or even collaborating in researching a common pedagogical issue), the journey of a teacher is mostly confined to the self. Considering the experiences of Misha, a teacher's professionalism should take into account how self is positioned within the context of his or her teaching environment, instead of the accomplishment of prescribed stakeholders.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In being part of this research, I was worried that I may come across as an 'academic tourist' with little knowledge regarding the context of study. This was cautioned by Hayes (2010a), in response to so-called experts who travel to places where they assume help is needed. Nonetheless, the regular communication I maintain with my former students and course mates from university who are now English teachers keep me aware of the English education landscape in Sabah. This also helped me understand issues emergent from Misha's narratives. In light of this, I believe being familiar with the local discourses is essential for the exploration of one's narratives. Furthermore, using a dialogic approach is also sensitive towards the multi-faceted positions enacted by a social entity; for instance, in this study, it was noted that Misha interacted differently when dealing with the ETA and when working on assessment for students.

This study, and other similar ones, is essential as it provides an emic perspective of how local English speaking teachers enact professionalism. Providing such as a space allows the legitimization and validation of their identity as an English language teacher (Liu 1999), instead of being cast as an unequal counterpart in ELT. From Misha's narratives, it becomes clear that she is enacting agency in delivering relevant learning materials through appropriate teaching approaches. Her professionalism may act as a counter-argument towards the discourse of incompetency typically associated with local English teachers, which is still rampant (Kubota & Lin 2006, Hickey 2018). Her lived experiences are also not merely intellectual elaboration, which Kumaravadivelu (2016) cautions against, but are evidence generated from real pedagogical actions taken with real people in a real place.

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