

## Teacher Education: English Language and Literature in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Environment

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As part of Malaysia's aspirations to achieve developed nation status by 2020, and become a key player in the global economy, the government has sought to improve the English language proficiency of its citizens while maintaining the status and significance of the Malay Language as the national language. Recent strategies have involved incorporating literature component in the English Language subject in primary and secondary schools but despite more than a decade of literature instruction, results in national and international tests show that literacy and proficiency in English among Malaysian students are below standards. With students' poor performance in English linked to teachers' apparent lack of proficiency in English and the expectation that all teachers of English in Malaysia are able to teach literature, it is necessary to examine how prospective teachers are being prepared for the task. The study reported in this paper explored the experience of pre-service and conversion teachers of English in dealing with studying literature as part of their teacher education at tertiary level. This experience reflects the interface between theoretical and pedagogical knowledge of literature, conceptualised as literary literacy. The findings provided new insights literature education in the non-native context, with implications for policy and practice in literature education of English teachers in Malaysia.

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## **Introduction**

Malaysia, long regarded as a truly multilingual and multicultural society, has a population of 26M, who among them speak approximately 140 languages (David et al, 2009, p. 158). Its colonial history of English-medium schools and mission schools established a firm basis for bilingualism of “English-and, with the second language being Chinese or Malay, for the most part” (Ridge, 2004, p. 408) and located Malaysia as an Outer Circle EL environment (Kachru, 2005). Post-independence (1957), Bahasa Melayu became the Medium of Instruction (MOI), consistent with national policies for Language and Education, gradually over 26 years in Peninsula Malaya, and by 1985 in Sabah and Sarawak. Gill (2007) explained clearly the rationale for the institution of Bahasa Melayu as the national language and official language - the language of education and administration - to affirm the legitimacy of Malays as “the dominant group in this country but also as a tool to unify the multi-ethnic citizenry of the nation – to provide a strong sense of cultural identity at the national level” (p. 2).

The gradualism of the change reflected the national linguistic complexity. As English medium instruction was phased out, Malaysian children could still be taught in their mother tongues (Mandarin and Tamil) for the first six years, with Malay and English as compulsory subjects. Furthermore, the Pupil’s Own Language (POL) could be taught if there were at least 15 students to make up a class (David, et al, 2009, p. 161). Even though English was regarded officially as the “second most important language” (Razak Report, 1956; Omar, 1992), the environment could really be regarded as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD). In rural areas where there was little exposure to English outside school, its status was more akin to a foreign language (David, 2004; Nunan, 2003).

Gradualism and success of the National Language Policy may have distracted attention from decline in the standard of English

language competence. Nunan noted pre- independence standards of English were high, and attributed the reduction of English virtually to the status of a foreign language to success of the National Language Policy, with adverse consequences for economic development:

It was only during the 1990s that the government realised that the loss of English would adversely affect economic development. Deterioration in the standards of English is seen as a major obstacle to the aspiration that Malaysia be declared a developed nation by 2020. (Nunan, 2003, p.602)

When Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad, enunciated in Vision 2020 (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991) the aspirations that Malaysia would achieve developed nation status by 2020, and become a key player in the global economy, he tacitly acknowledged that English had become the lingua franca of both trade and commerce and the knowledge economy. A series of changes in English language policy were instituted:

- the 1996 Education Act initiated English as the MOI for technical areas in post-secondary curricula;
- English was to be studied at advanced level at sixth form or pre-university level; and
- English was re-introduced as the MOI for Maths and Science (PPSMI) in 2003.

The latter change caused widespread disquiet, raising fears that the social and education disadvantage of rural children attributed to colonial practices of the pre-independence era would re-emerge (Gill, 2005, p. 246; Azman, 2006, p. 103). Doubts were expressed about the capacity of schools to deliver effective teaching in English because of a shortage of teachers competent in English language (Nunan, 2003; Ridge, 2004). In 2009, on the basis of feedback from various sources after its implementation, the policy of English for Maths and Science was revoked, effective from 2012. That reversion of policy caused equal controversy as

evidenced by Soong's (2012) chronology of press releases between 1996 and 2012.

The shortage of qualified and competent teachers was not limited to the primary school sector. Incorporating literature in English as a compulsory study component in the Malaysian English language syllabus for secondary schools in 2000 (Ministry of Education, 1999) produced resource demands as well. Because literature formed part of the teacher education program at university, it was assumed that all English teachers would be competent to teach literature. To meet increased demand for secondary English teachers, primary school teachers were offered the opportunity to convert to teachers of English in secondary schools by completing degrees in English/Literature.

## **The Study**

The overarching aim of the study reported in this paper was to develop understanding of literary literacy for professional preparation of pre-service and conversion English teachers in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context. Specifically, it explored the participants' experiences of studying literature as part of their university teacher education program. The findings provided new insights on literature education in the ESL situation, with implications for policy and practice in literature education of English teachers in Malaysia. The objectives of the study were to:

- investigate pre-service and conversion English teachers' perspectives on learning and teaching literature;
- examine and compare the experiences of pre-service and conversion English teachers in dealing with studying university literature courses;
- document literary literacy practices in university literature classrooms that pre-service and conversion teachers considered useful for their professional preparation to teach literature.

Conversion English teachers were in-service teachers selected by the Ministry of Education Malaysia from schools across the nation for English teacher education programs at public universities. The term “conversion English teacher” was coined to reflect the participants’ conversion from primary school teachers of subjects other than English to trained teachers of secondary school English and Literature. The conversion English teachers in this study had been teaching in primary schools from five to 17 years, mostly in remote and rural areas, before enrolling in the English teacher education program. Pre-service teachers were secondary school graduates selected by the Ministry of Higher Education to be trained as future secondary school English teachers.

Literary literacy was defined broadly as literacy in literature, encompassing ability to read, understand and respond to literary works in the target language. Because participants were studying literature as part of their professional preparation to teach English and literature in secondary schools, the term literary literacy referred to the ability to study literature and to teach literature in English, encompassing literary competence, language competence, and pedagogical knowledge. The interface between theoretical and pedagogical knowledge of literature was conceptualised as literary literacy. The study explored the experiences of pre-service and conversion English teachers studying university literature in English courses in order to ascertain their literary literacy within the Malaysian ESL context.

In Malaysian primary and secondary schools, literature in English is a compulsory component of the subject “English Language”. All English teachers are expected to be able to teach literature in English. The Malaysian government’s policy expectation was that literacy and proficiency in English would be improved by reading literary works in English (Subramaniam, 2007). However, a decade after implementation, the standard of English among Malaysian schoolchildren was shown to have declined. Forty-four per cent failed to meet minimum proficiency in Reading in to the 2009 PISA results and only 28% achieved a minimum credit in

2011 English paper against Cambridge 1119 standards (The Star, 26 September, 2012). More alarming were media reports of low English proficiency among Malaysian English teachers. Significant numbers failed to meet the minimum proficiency standard of the Cambridge Placement (CPT) Test required to teach English. It was believed that teachers' low proficiency in English contributed to lower student achievement (The Star, 26 September, 2012). Proficiency in English had implications not only for the teaching of English, but also for the teaching of literature in English

The recently announced Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2035 (Ministry of Education, 2012) aspires for every student to be taught English by a teacher proficient according to international standards, and that proficiency in English be boosted through exposure to more literature in English through an expanded, compulsory English Literature module at the secondary level. While applauding the Ministry's initiatives, a local educationist and president of the Malaysian English Language Teachers Association (MELTA), Dr Ganakumaran Subramanian observed that the approach of using literature to help students improve their proficiency had not been very effective because of a shortage of well-trained teachers (The Star, September 12, 2012).

## **Method**

The interpretivist qualitative case study reported here was located at a single university site and involved two subgroups: pre-service teachers and conversion English teachers. Primary data were drawn from focus group interviews with 23 pre-service teachers and 16 conversion teachers enrolled in an undergraduate teaching degree at a Malaysian public university. These two groups were observed over one academic semester in which they studied various university literature courses. Focus group interviews and non-participant classroom observations were supplemented by documentary data from the participants and their lecturers, comprising the participants' summary sheets, written work and

assessment results, official documents and curriculum, and their lecturers' reports. Lecturers were interviewed individually twice during the semester. Data analysis entailed the comparative cross-case analysis of data from the two sub-groups to address the general research question: What are the experiences of pre-service and conversion English teachers in Malaysia in studying literature in English in the teacher education program at university?

### ***Participants' profiles***

Demographic data indicated that the two participant groups had very different educational backgrounds, English Language proficiency, and experience of studying literary texts, especially in English. These differences had considerable influence on their experiences in their courses of study, and on their decisions about their projected occupational pathways after they completed their course.

***Pre-service teachers.*** The pre-service teachers were similar in age and secondary school education. Aged between 23 to 25 years, they entered the program as high school graduates with STPM (Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia, or Malaysian High School Certificate, MHSC), equivalent to Cambridge 'A' level. They applied for placement in tertiary education through the admission unit of the Ministry of Higher Education. Successful candidates were selected on merit, with emphasis upon their overall academic points. English Language proficiency, set at a minimum Band 3 (defined as "Limited User") of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was a pre-requisite for English and English Education majors. While candidates could nominate choices of up to eight different programs at eight different public universities, they were not guaranteed their preferred program or university. Most participants in the pre-service group reported that the program and/or the university assigned to them was either their least preferred or not in their list of preferences. In other words, many of them had not planned to study TESL or to become English teachers.

Another commonality among the pre-service teachers was their background in learning literature. All, except Hazem, were from the first cohort of Malaysian secondary school students to learn literature in English as a tested component of the English Language subject at Form Four and Form Five which had been introduced in 2001/2. Hazem, two years older than his classmates, had not studied the literature component, but had studied a one-semester literature course at teachers' college and had taught literature to Form Four students as a substitute teacher before enrolling in this teaching degree. Thus, all of the pre-service teachers had previous exposure to formal classroom literature learning. However, they all claimed this previous experience was limited and entirely different from their current experience in university literature courses. In short, they believed that they were not adequately prepared to study literature at tertiary level.

In this study, the participants' ability in English and literature was defined according to their proficiency in the English Language ranking in the MUET, and their competence in literature indicated by their grades in a previous literature course, Malaysian Literature in English (MLE) (Table 1). This course was common to both pre-service and conversion English teachers groups and, therefore, used as a benchmark for measuring their competence in literature. The existing pattern in scoring for university literature courses allocated relatively few A to B+ grades. Grades B to C+ were common and thus adopted as the average score. The categories of levels of competence in literature were set according to grades obtained in university literature courses, namely, "above average" (grades A, A- and B); "average" (grades B, B+ and C+); and "below average" (grades C, C-, D and F). While 'C' was a passing grade at the university, it was generally considered a weak or 'borderline' pass.



Table 1. Summary of the pre-service teachers' demographics, literature competence, educational and literature background

<b>Participant Name*/gender/age</b>	<b>MUET (Band)</b>	<b>Performance in literature</b>	<b>Educational and literature background</b>
Tony - M/23	5	Above average	STPM Literature as elective subject in Form 6 Literature component in Form 4 & 5
Annie - F/23	5		
Cyndi - F/23	5		
Estella - F/23	6		
Edwin - M/23	5		
Flora - F/23	4		
Phan - F/23	5		
Leann - F/23	5		
Hazem - M/25	4	Average	STPM Diploma in Teaching (Primary school, English) One introductory literature course at Teachers College
Bella - F/23	4		
Azmi - M/23	5		
Najwa - F/23	4		
Norma - F/23	4		
Holly - F/23	4		
Mary - F/23	4		
Zelda - F/23	4		
Jimmy - M/23	3		
Ellie - F/24	3		
Salmi - F/23	4		
Teong - M/23	4		
Anna - F/23	4		
Sing - F/23	5		
Wang - M/23	5		Below average

\*All names are pseudonyms.

**Conversion teachers.** Conversion teachers came from two different cohorts: 4 from a senior cohort and 12 from a junior cohort. Although the senior cohort was enrolled in a four-year teacher education program and the junior cohort a three-year program, all were in their final year at the university (Table 2).

The senior cohort was comprised of students who had failed to graduate with their peers at the end of a previous four-year program. To complete failed units, mostly literature, they had re-enrolled for an additional semester. During this study, together with the larger (65) and younger pre-service teachers' group they undertook two literature courses: Young Adult Literature (YAL) and New Literature in English (NLE). They formed a close-knit group and worked together for most of their assigned coursework. They reported that they were constantly stressed and frustrated in learning literature, particularly as they had to deal with two literature courses in a single semester. They sat together at the same spot in class and rarely contributed to whole-class discussions unless called upon by the lecturer.

The conversion teachers from the senior cohort were homogeneous in their English Language proficiency and their ability to learn literature as demonstrated in their results and performance across several university literature courses. They were categorised as below average: they had failed several literature courses, which they were repeating, and had been left behind by their original cohort. Despite their previous four years in the program, they felt they had limited and negative experiences learning literature. They could not recall secondary school experiences of studying literature either because it had been too long ago, or too different to have any significant impact on their current situation learning literature.

Table 2. Summary of cohort description and demographics of conversion English teachers

Cohort description	Age range	Gender/No. of participants	
		Male	Female
<b>Senior cohort</b>			
Program: English as a Second Language (ESL) 4 year teacher education program	25-29		0
Total of 14 compulsory literature courses	30-34		2
Current semester: 2 literature courses taken together with the pre-service group	35-39		1
	40-44		1
<b>Junior cohort</b>			
Program: English as a Second Language (ESL) 3 year teacher education program	25-29	1	3
Total of 10 literature courses	30-34	5	2
Current semester: 1 literature course taken in their own group	35-39		0
	40-44		1
<b>Total</b>		6	10

The junior cohort of conversion teachers had diverse backgrounds in learning literature. Most traced their experiences of learning literature, albeit in a different language, to secondary school; others recalled their informal and early exposure to reading literature at home and at primary school. In terms of proficiency, the majority (eight) of the junior cohort were average (grades B to C+), three below average (grades C and below) and one above average (grades A to B+) performance in several literature courses, including Malaysian Literature (MLE), also taken by the pre-service teachers. Not all conversion teachers in this cohort had English Language backgrounds: Sheila and Chan were trained to teach Chinese Language at teachers' college, whereas Jessie was trained in Mathematics. Like their seniors, these conversion teachers had completed one introductory course on literature during a fourteen-week immersion program, a pre-requisite for enrolment in the undergraduate teacher education program at the university. For Sheila and Chan, this was their first experience of formal learning of literature in English.

### *Cross-case analysis*

The cross-case analysis of the findings from the sub-cases of the pre-service and the conversion English teachers produced convergent and divergent perspectives. Five emerging themes and issues were identified:

1. Appropriateness of preparation to study literature
2. Adequacy to study literature
3. Adequacy of professional preparation to teach literature
4. Dissonance between the ideational and operational literature curriculum
5. Commitment to teaching as a career

Table 3: Summary of the conversion English teachers' literature competence, educational and literature background

<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Literature competence</b>	<b>Previous literature experience</b>	<b>Teachers college major</b>	<b>Literature background</b>
<b>Senior cohort</b>	Patricia	Below average	Teachers' college: one course introductory literature	English Language	Enjoyed novels and short stories but hated poetry
	Sally		Malay literature at secondary school	Malay Language	Did not read much
	Imelda		Secondary school English poetry class	English Language	Hated poetry
	Pamela		Teachers' college: one course introductory literature	English Language	Enjoyed reading but hated poetry
<b>Junior cohort</b>	Sheila	Above average	Chinese literature - at home and at teachers' college	Chinese Language	Chinese and English literature
	Marcus	Average	Basic diploma in primary teaching (English) at teachers' college; One year special course for in-service English teachers	English Language	Loved literature - for cultural exposure
	Greta		Literature program for primary school	English Language	Children's literature for primary school
	Jonas		Malay Literature at secondary school as examination subject (Form 5 & 6)	English Language	Loved literature

\* All names are pseudonyms

Table 3 (Cond.): Summary of the conversion English teachers' literature competence, educational and literature background

<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Literature competence</b>	<b>Previous literature experience</b>	<b>Teachers college major</b>	<b>Literature background</b>
	Jackson		Malay Literature at secondary school as examination subject at Form 5	English Language	Disliked literature
	Donny		Malay Literature at secondary school as examination subject at Form 5	English Language	Liked reading and English literature
	Jariah		Read English novels at home as a child with her mother	English Language	Reading as a hobby
	Melba		Library books for daily book report at primary school	English Language	Preferred short stories
	Chan		Chinese literature – at home and at teachers' college	Chinese Language	Chinese and English novels
	Jessy		English Literature as elective examination subject at Form 6	Mathematics	Enjoyed reading literature
	Imran	Below average	Teachers' college: one introductory course on literature	English Language	English as favourite subject
	Melvin		Teachers' college: one course introductory literature	English Language	Local/Malaysian literature

\* All names are pseudonyms

### *Convergent perspectives*

Despite great differences in their demographics and backgrounds, the conversion and the pre-service English participants had all been educated in Malaysian schools and were familiar with the exam-driven, teacher-centred approach to learning and teaching. They also had parity as university students enrolled in the teacher education program. They expressed many similar views within the emerging themes of this study.

*Appropriateness of preparation to study literature.* Participants from both groups believed they had been inadequately prepared to study literature in English at tertiary level. Their previous experiences with literature were completely different from the literary studies in the teacher education program. In their view, university literature courses represented “pure” literary studies, the big “L”, which focused on literary criticism and literary theories. Their previous exposure to literature had been limited to leisure reading, with a small “r”, whereas literary studies require extensive and critical reading, with a big “R”.

Although pre-service teachers had been exposed to various literary genres of the literature component of the secondary school English Language curriculum they felt that experience had been “very different” and “too basic” to prepare them for literary studies at tertiary level. They felt they lacked the necessary attributes to begin literary studies, that is, a basic knowledge of literature and an interest in reading literary materials. Conversion teachers, many of whom came from non-English major backgrounds, had even less exposure to literature. After many years of teaching subjects other than English in remote and rural schools, it was difficult for them to adjust to their new role as university students. The English teacher education program not only required them to study literature, but also to study English for the first time. Literature was a compulsory strand of their teacher education program.

Many pre-service participants reported that they did not apply for teaching degrees, but accepted the offer as their ticket to tertiary education and a job prospect in the future. Similarly, conversion teachers enrolled in this degree program to achieve promotion in their careers. These purely pragmatic motivations were not compensated by adequate personal preparation to study literature.

Many across both groups reported that they had read hardly any literary texts in English prior to this program and were either completely ignorant or from the very beginning had negative pre-conceived notions about literary studies. In other words, they were intellectually and educationally unprepared for tertiary education, much less for literary studies at tertiary level. For many, the initial stage of literary studies in the teacher education program involved dealing with their prejudices against literature: they regarded it as boring, difficult or irrelevant to their future careers. This was especially true for some pre-service teachers who began to consider not becoming schoolteachers, but rather to pursue further education or alternative careers.

*Adequacy to study literature.* At the time of their interviews, participants from both groups regarded themselves as particularly inadequate in terms of their capacity to study of Literature. Most of their literature courses involved literary criticism and literary theories per se, and participants formed the opinion that studying literature revolved around making the “right” interpretation. Consequently for them, the biggest challenge was finding the “right” interpretation of the literary works.

*Socio-cultural dimension.* The challenges these students faced in studying literature can be analysed according to socio-cultural, linguistic, and cognitive dimensions. Emergent patterns in their literary literacy practices indicated they were under-prepared culturally to engage critically with literary texts. Coming from a teacher-centred and exam-oriented school system, they were not used to the freedom of interpretation promoted in university literature classrooms. Particularly at the initial stage of their



studies, they were unwilling to engage in active learning. Instead, they relied on explicit guidance and directions from lecturers; waited for the contribution of ideas from regularly outspoken students during classroom discussions; or copied notes and supplementary materials to be memorised for exams. They were reluctant to make “guesses” at the meaning and message of literary texts because they were pre-occupied with looking for the “correct” interpretations. They were unwilling to assert their opinions and pursue their ideas because they assumed that others who were more knowledgeable were always right. Their writing was poor because they lacked creativity and linguistic and higher order thinking skills.

Practices described above suggest that participants drew from their previous learning culture, in secondary schools or at the teachers’ college, where the teacher was regarded as the “transmitter” of knowledge and students the mere “receivers” of that knowledge. Many were unwilling to make extra effort to process the received knowledge to construct meaningful new knowledge.

From classroom observations of the various university literature courses, it appeared that the lecturers involved worked hard at changing this culture or “mentality”, adopting learner-centred approaches which required active learning in all classroom activities. They introduced a variety of learning activities such as open discussions, debates, forums, presentations and role-plays. Many participants began to enjoy and appreciate these activities as they developed interest and confidence. Others, however, remained “passive” in literature classes because of their inability to communicate effectively. The senior cohort of conversion teachers remained highly apprehensive.

*Linguistic dimension.* High levels of English Language proficiency are crucial for the study of literature in English at tertiary level. Literary criticism requires good command of the language, meaning an extensive vocabulary and effective communication skills. Many participants across both groups had

low proficiency in English. They were unable to manage extensive reading because of their inadequate vocabulary and knowledge of literary terms and expressions. Similarly, their attempts to express their ideas and responses to the literary texts were hampered by lack of “suitable words” and effective “ways with words” to express themselves.

While the pre-service participants’ proficiency in English was measured by the MUET score, there was no specific English proficiency indicator for the conversion teachers who had entered the program through channel which required different criteria. Many conversion teachers had no previous training in English. Some pre-service participants had Band 3 in MUET, categorised as “Limited User”. The verbatim transcripts of the participants’ interviews and their written work had gross grammatical errors and restricted vocabulary. According to the lecturers who taught the courses, there was not much they could do in the classroom to help participants improve their language proficiency because the focus was on teaching literature, and not language. However, many participants had expected the program to improve their language.

*Cognitive dimension.* One of the lecturers categorised a third of the pre-service and conversion teachers in the program as “not fit” for tertiary education because they lacked “aptitude”. He offered that judgement on the basis of having taught them for the duration of the program. In this case, “aptitude” was understood to encompass the general ability to process learning at a higher level. The generally mediocre performance in literature of the majority of the participants suggested that they were not able to go beyond the “analysis” level of the Bloom’s taxonomy of learning. Some, especially some from the senior cohort of conversion teachers, did not understand fully the literature content.

Participants from both groups cited their limited previous experience as a key factor in their inadequacy to study literature. They were not familiar with learning literature for its aesthetic

value, or with the transactional approach to reading advocated in university literature courses. Consequently, while they were fascinated by the new knowledge and approach to literature, studying university literature courses was highly challenging for many.

*Adequacy of professional preparation to teach literature.* The participants' perspectives on the adequacy of their professional preparation to teach literature were largely divergent, but both groups acknowledged the role of practicum in shaping their attitudes toward teaching literature. As most pre-service teachers had no previous experience in teaching and conversion teachers had taught only in remote and rural primary schools, practicum was their first encounter with teaching in "real" secondary school literature classrooms. They had diverse practicum experiences, but both groups had common concerns regarding the situation in the schools, namely, the schoolchildren's poor attitudes towards learning and literature; the practicing schoolteachers' poor attitudes toward teaching literature; and the importance of collegial support for effective literature education in schools. Both groups shared a belief that the content knowledge of literature provided by the university literature courses was adequate for teaching literature at secondary school level. That is, the content knowledge base in their professional preparation to teach literature was deemed appropriate. However, post-practicum, participants from both groups were concerned that they had not received in their university literature courses adequate and explicit methods for teaching literature.

*Dissonance between the ideational and operational literature curriculum.* While the study of literature was intended as professional preparation to teach literature in secondary schools, the university literature curriculum inclined towards the traditional approach to literary studies. Emphasis was on knowledge about literature through the study of canonical texts and literary figures and periods. Although contemporary works and local writers were included, mostly in the MLE course, the thrust was still on literary

criticism and literary theories. There was little overt attention to pedagogy and practice to link knowledge about literature with pedagogical knowledge.

The practicum experience exposed dissonance between the ideational and the operational curriculum in schools. Participants observed that objectives of the literature component of the English Language curriculum included values such as the enhancement of literary appreciation and the promotion of personal growth, but these were not reflected in classroom practices. Instead, they observed that schoolchildren were not reading the prescribed literary texts because teachers were teaching-to-the-exams in order to complete the syllabus on time. Neither were affective values of that literature a priority. Reading literary texts was treated in classrooms as an extended reading comprehension exercise. Participants concluded that literature in secondary school was not “real” literature as intended in the curriculum. While it may have been a disappointing revelation that schoolchildren were not experiencing the quality literature education that the curriculum envisaged, it lifted the pressure off pre-service and conversion teachers to teach the “real” literature in the “proper” way they experienced in the university literature classrooms.

### *Divergent perspectives*

While they shared many similarities in their new roles as literature learners in the program, the two groups of participants differed markedly in their perspectives on teaching literature and on teaching as a profession.

*Appropriateness of preparation to study literature.* The only difference in their views on the appropriateness of their preparation to study literature was that some pre-service participants had taken initiatives to prepare themselves for literary studies at tertiary level. Tony, for example, had studied literature in English as an examination subject at Form Six for two years as a private candidate. His passion for literature and his desire to

pursue literary studies at a higher level were his intrinsic motivations. As a private candidate taught by a secondary school literature teacher, Tony had not experienced literature in a formal classroom setting, as had other pre-service teachers.

For Estella, who was equally passionate about reading and literature, her extensive reading and her high level of language competence – she was the only member of the cohort who achieved MUET Band 6 – contributed to her success in her university studies. Tony and Estella demonstrated that reading ability, language competence, and, most importantly, intrinsic motivation constitute appropriate preparation for literary studies at the tertiary level.

*Adequacy to study literature.* Although the majority of participants from both groups were in many respects inadequately prepared for literary studies, about ten per cent of each group were judged by their peers and lecturers as “good” in literature. They included Tony and Estella who had been adequately prepared from the beginning of the program, and a few others who quickly developed interest and performed well in their literary studies. Participants from both groups who improved remarkably in the program had become intrinsically motivated, participated actively in the classroom learning activities, and improve their reading habits and skills by completing assigned readings and conducting extended research assigned tasks. Notably, they already had a sufficient command of the language (MUET Bands 4 and 5) to perform at higher levels. Another important factor in their developed competence was the positive influence of motivated peers. For example, Cindy who described herself initially as a “reluctant” reader who was indifferent about literature, worked closely with Estella and Tony and came to share their passion.

The adequacy of participants was demonstrated also in the way that they dealt with literature examinations. Classroom practices promoted learner-centred, collaborative learning and oral production, whereas the literature examination demanded

individual written production. This mismatch between classroom practices and examinations posed real problems for many participants, especially among the senior cohort of conversion teachers. Most participants in both groups said they did not know how to prepare for literature examinations. Pre-service teachers were observed to resort to rote learning and memorising, techniques drawn from their strategies in dealing with examinations in secondary schools. They took elaborate notes, memorised supplementary notes and commentaries, and even “spotted” possible questions. Their lecturers disapproved and tried to encourage them to be more critical and creative in their responses, but pre-service teachers’ generally performed better than conversion teachers in their examinations. Lecturers acknowledged that conversion teachers were good at “talking” about their ideas and answers, but were unable to transpose their ideas into written answers. They often misunderstood questions in examination papers. Perhaps they did not prepare themselves for exams at all. Some commented that they were not impressed with those who “memorise” notes for exams. It might be concluded that having a “not-so-good-strategy” is better than no strategy at all. Lecturers suggested also that conversion teachers displayed a “laid back” approach to learning whereas pre-service teachers were “more enthusiastic to learn new things”. There was a sense of competitiveness among pre-service teachers, compared with conversion teachers who were content just to pass the course.

*Adequacy of preparation to teach literature.* Pre-service and conversion teachers differed considerably in their perspectives on their professional preparation to teach literature. Pre-service teachers without teaching experience expected to learn first about teaching as a profession and second about teaching English Language and literature in secondary schools. Conversion teachers believed they had adequate teaching experience and focused on acquiring the pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach English and literature. Prior to their professional practicum, they also were curious about teaching in secondary schools. Post-practicum

perspectives on teaching showed a wide gap between the two groups, particularly on the adequacy of professional preparation. Consistent with their different backgrounds and expectations, each group had different assumptions and expectations about teaching and teaching literature. The pre-service participants were not adequately prepared for the challenges of teaching in schools where they encountered uninterested students, indifferent schoolteachers and uncooperative administration. Struggles with student behaviour and classroom management, which occupied much of their time and effort, caused more concern among pre-service teachers about their lack of preparation for teaching and learning generally, than their ability to teach English and literature in particular. While practicum provided socialisation to the school and to the teaching profession, it produced more questions and uncertainties about their futures, especially among those who were passionate about literature and were originally enthusiastic about teaching. They wondered if they could tolerate the harsh realities of school and the conservatism of the existing school norms. In short, practicum created a dissonance in the pre-service teachers' professional preparation.

Conversely, the practicum experience confirmed the expectations of the conversion English teachers that teaching literature would not differ from teaching any other subject and that teaching in the secondary schools would not differ from teaching in primary schools. They believed that their experience in teaching was adequate preparation to teach literature. They planned to apply the same pedagogical practices that worked for them in their previous schools, or that were used by the teachers currently teaching in secondary schools. Their poor English and their failure to use the strategies offered in the university literature courses suggested that they would contribute little to changing English language and literature learning in secondary schools.

Post practicum, the pre-service participants perceived that their professional preparation was inadequate because they had little or no instruction in teaching methods. They were not able to apply

new approaches to teaching literature because of their limited practical experience and the challenge of professional socialisation. They believed they had adequate content knowledge of literature, but lacked opportunities and the skills to translate their knowledge into teaching practice.

The participants' practicum experiences can be arranged along a continuum from highly negative to highly positive. Pre-service teachers' experiences were spread along the continuum, but conversion teachers' experiences clustered in the middle. These experiences are not fixed or exclusive categories but a movement along a continuum according to their respective situations, summarised in Figure 1.

In so far as the university literature courses prepared the participants with adequate content knowledge, and that practicum provided the necessary socialisation to schools and the profession, the teacher education program provided appropriate professional preparation. The post-practicum awareness that they needed more, and more specific pedagogical knowledge might have come too late in the program. Participants felt that, as final year students, they had insufficient time and opportunity to transfer their knowledge of literature into classroom practice. Moreover, their remaining university literature courses focused on literary criticism and theory to the exclusion of pedagogy.

Conversion teachers had more realistic attitude and adopted a pragmatic outlook. They were ready to conform to the existing norms in schools to ensure their survival with their minimal content knowledge and inappropriate teaching methods. The dissonance between the ideational curriculum and the operational curriculum encouraged that pragmatism.



		Pre-service teachers	Conversion teachers & Pre-service teachers
		Practicum experiences	
		Negative	Neutral
		Positive	
<b>Contributing factors</b>			
<b>Personal</b>	<p>Surprised by realities of school</p> <p>Stressed by conflict between personal interests/ values and school norms</p> <p>Intolerant of uncertainties in teaching</p>	<p>Familiar with pupils and school norms</p> <p>Willing to sacrifice personal interests/values</p> <p>Concerned about practicum evaluation</p>	<p>Driven by personal passion for the subject</p> <p>Confident with ability to motivate pupils to appreciate literature</p> <p>Excited about opportunities to apply theory to practice</p>
<b>Contextual</b>	<p>Lacked collegial support</p> <p>Frustrated by pupils' poor attitude</p> <p>Concerned about discipline problems</p> <p>Concerned about pupils motivation on the subject</p>	<p>Established network with other teachers</p> <p>Able to control class</p> <p>Concerned about pupils' performance in school exams</p>	<p>Encouraged by pupils' positive reaction to enjoyable lessons</p> <p>Optimistic about changing pupils' perspectives on the subject</p>

Figure 1. Summary of practicum experiences and their contributing factors

*Commitment to teaching as a career.* The participants' commitment to teaching as a career was influenced very much by their experiences within schools and their judgements about the appropriateness of their preparation for teaching. Being in-service, conversion teachers expected that they would continue as teachers, albeit in the different context of secondary education and teaching the specific subject for which they had been re-trained. Their education degrees would qualify them for promotional opportunities and substantial increases in salary. As they had completed service in remote and rural primary schools, most expected to be posted to urban secondary schools. They were ensured brighter career futures. For the conversion English teachers there was good reason to remain in the profession.

Pre-service teachers were not bonded to the Ministry of Education and could choose whether to become teachers after graduation. They were selected for the program by the Ministry of Higher Education on the general expectation that they would help to meet the demand for trained secondary school English and literature teachers. However, dissonance between their professional preparation in the teacher education program and their practicum experiences shook the resolve of many. Pre-service teachers who were passionate about literature and enthusiastic about “transforming” the existing norms of teacher-centred, exam-driven teaching in the literature classrooms were faced with a dilemma about teaching “real” literature in the “proper way” and teaching “basic” literature according to conservative norms. In their view, “real” literature meant quality literary studies to expose students to authentic and stimulating literary texts, to develop their interest in reading literature and to empower them to engage meaningfully with literary texts. The “proper” way to teach literature meant using a variety of pedagogical approaches similar to those they had experienced in university classrooms. Their realisation that those aspirations and approaches to teaching might be impossible within the constraints of the existing school system was disillusioning. The difficulties they foresaw in balancing quality literature education with survival in the current school system

caused many to reconsider their futures. Pre-service teachers who had sufficiently high levels of English, a passion for literature, and who were prospectively capable in learning and teaching literature were not willing to commit to the non-conducive environment of the current school system.

Those who remained committed to teaching as a career were conversion English teachers, generally less proficient in English, not as passionate about literature, and who barely managed literary studies in the teacher education program. This included the senior cohort of conversion teachers who consistently failed literature examinations and who were highly apprehensive about literature. The pre-service teachers who rated themselves “poor” to “average” in literature because they lacked proficiency in English and general literary competence confirmed their intention become schoolteachers. Unhappily, it may seem, conversion teachers and pre-service teachers committed to the teaching profession would teach English and literature according to their minimal levels of expertise.

### **Key Categories**

The findings of the cross-case analysis identified three key categories, namely, the complexities of literary studies for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) learners, the pedagogical challenges of literature education for teachers, and broadening the definition of literary literacy in the Malaysian context. These categories led to propositions which have implications for curriculum, practice and policy for literature education in the ESL context of Malaysia.

#### ***Category 1: Complexities of literary studies for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) learners***

*Proposition.* To improve the efficacy of teacher education programs in English literature it is necessary to bridge the gap

between previous educational experiences and tertiary literature studies.

*Discussion.* Cultural diversity can be viewed from two aspects: the multicultural demographics and backgrounds of the participants and the learning cultures from which they came. The demographics showed they represented many ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and various indigenous tribes, including Bidayuh, Iban, Melanau and Kelabit. Although the study did not focus on ethnicity, the multicultural backgrounds of the participants explain their multilingual practices. Their depiction of their home literacy practices indicated that English was not commonly used, they rarely read, and they had little or no experience reading literary materials in English. Those who read usually choose literary works in their mother tongue or a language, such as the national language, Malay, commonly used in their schools and communities.

Participants had varied educational backgrounds, few of which transferred easily to the university context. Most disadvantaged were senior conversion teachers who had no previous experience of literary studies, who were not prepared as English Language teachers in their initial training, and whose teaching experience in remote and rural schools had offered no opportunity for improving English language competence. English is not commonly used in these schools because the lingua franca is Malay. The few who taught English as a subject reported that they often delivered lessons in translation either to Malay or their mother tongue. Resources and reading materials in English were scarce, and reading in English was rarely practised.

The wide gap between literature studies at school and tertiary level needs to be bridged first, by creating a non-threatening learning environment, and second, by providing adequate support to develop English language and literary competence. The impact of the culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds necessitates approaches to literary studies which take account of the students'

cognitive status and their affective state. The affective domain crucial to the study of literature has been neglected, as was exemplified by the senior cohort of conversion teachers who had previous negative experiences in literary studies.

### *Implications*

At university level:

- Develop objectives to foster interest in and intrinsic motivation to study literature (e.g. by including literature which is linguistically and culturally familiar);
- Provide more supportive learning environments, with lecturers who recognise needs and potential of learners and who can provide moral and material support for learning;
- Deploy classroom practices to bridge gaps between previous learning experiences and interactive reading and writing practices;
- Develop strategies to transfer competence from oracy to written discourse, developing metacognitive awareness of learning processes; and
- Resolve the mismatches between teaching and learning processes and examination practices.
- At school level curriculum implementation:
- Ensure that the school literature education provides appropriate preparation for advanced literary studies (development of language and literary competence and literacy in English);
- Monitor closely how the school literature curriculum is implemented to ensure quality learning and teaching of literature from early childhood; and

- Ensure that the status literature in primary and secondary schools is raised by making literature a separate subject.

At policy level:

- Commence English language competence and literary studies in primary school;
- Select teacher education candidates based on high academic merit; and
- Select candidates for English language/literature studies on academic merit, English language competence and intrinsic interest in literary studies.

### ***Category 2: Pedagogical challenges of literature education***

*Proposition.* Improving theory and practice interface for quality teaching relies on improving the relationship between university teaching programs and teaching practice experiences in schools.

*Discussion.* The aim of literature education for teachers is to produce quality teachers who will provide quality literature education. The quality of literature education is determined by a fundamentally sound interface of theory and practice. There must be balance between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge for the preparation of secondary school English and literature teachers.

Quality teachers need, first, to achieve levels of language literary competence sufficient to study and to teach literature. They need to acquire not only content knowledge of literature, but also the ability to relate it to pedagogical knowledge and to develop effective pedagogical skills for literary studies. Second, they need to have sufficient interest in literature and literary studies to foster in their pupils similar interest in reading and in literature. Ideally, the motivation to study literature should go beyond the

instrumental: teachers who are passionate about literature will commit not only to the profession, but also to quality teaching and learning.

The pre-service and conversion English teachers in this study were required to study literature in English. The approaches and activities they experienced at university were learner-centred and emphasised independent and autonomous learning. Many felt they had not been given proper instruction on how to study literature. They wanted more scaffolding in the forms of modelling and extended explanations. Participants from both groups criticised the inadequacy of pedagogical practice in the university curriculum, as they had only one course on methods of teaching literature. Their post-practicum awareness that they lacked teaching skills caused many to reconsider their preparedness for teaching.

### *Implications*

At university level:

- Recruit teacher educators with deep understanding of the content knowledge of literature and a sufficient if not extensive teaching experience;
- Enhance opportunities for professional development for teacher educators in both the substantive content area (literary studies) and pedagogical practices relevant to schools;
- Provide a balance of theoretical knowledge and practical or pedagogical knowledge of literature with equal emphasis on literary criticism and on methodology in literature education courses; and
- Increase opportunities for teaching practice by conducting the Teaching Practicum in at least two sessions, at the beginning and in the middle of the teacher education program, for more exposure to school classrooms and teaching experience.

At policy level:

- Recognise that quality teacher education requires academic staff with expertise in both the substantive content field (literary studies) and methodological expertise to maximise the theory/practice interface.

***Category 3: Broadening the definition of literary literacy in the Malaysian context***

*Proposition.* Literary literacy in the Malaysian context is more productively understood from a socio-cultural perspective which recognises the cultural and linguistically diverse milieu.

*Discussion.* The cultural diversity of Malaysia suggests that for the foreseeable future both learners and teachers will operate in a complex linguistic and cultural milieu. Even though Malaysia has been categorised as an Outer Circle EL environment (Kachru, 2005), changes in education policies since independence have been accompanied by decline in English language competence within schools. The assumption that reading literary texts in English in schools will enhance English language acquisition will hold true only when there is available a sufficient number of skilled teachers who are highly competent in English and similarly knowledgeable about literature.

Evidence from this research showed that conversion teachers who had minimal proficiency in English struggled to read and understand literary texts. Their levels of literacy might be best described as early stage development. For many, this was their first experience in studying literature, but they remained confident and optimistic about their futures. Their practicum experience demonstrated that their minimal levels of literary literacy were inadequate for quality literature teaching in secondary schools. They argued, however, that within context of the operational



curriculum the concept of a “good literature learner” was defined by student performance in examinations.

Central to the concept of literary literacy is the notion of a “good literature learner”. The understanding among highly idealistic pre-service participants’ of what was a “good literature learner” contrasted markedly with the conversion teachers’ pragmatic awareness. This was reflected their approach to literary studies in the teacher education program. Both groups agreed that a good literature learner does not necessarily make a good literature teacher. Pre-service participants believed that enthusiasm for and a sound knowledge of literature would produce effective teachers capable of guiding reluctant students toward a realisation of the aesthetic value of literature, thereby increasing their interest in and willingness to engage with literature. Conversion teachers, in context of the operational curriculum, conceptualised “good” literature teaching instrumentally: student performance in examinations.

If the presumed relationship between studying literary texts in English and enhancement of English language competence is to be fulfilled, a working definition of literary literacy in the multicultural context of Malaysia must encompass the three domains of literacy in English, literacy in literature in English and pedagogical literacy.

### *Implications*

At university level:

- Improve alignment between the university literature curriculum and the school literature curriculum to recognise the socio-cultural context of Malaysia; and
- Institute more pedagogically contextualised teaching of content knowledge of literature as “mere content knowledge is likely to be as useless pedagogically as content-free skill” (Shulman, 1986, p.8).

At policy level:

- Unpack the broad concept of literary literacy into discreet components of language competence, literary competence, and pedagogical knowledge; and
- Determine benchmarking standards to ensure quality literature education produces literature teachers with high level of literary literacy.

### **Conclusion**

Within the evolving concept of literacy, literary literacy of pre-service and conversion teachers studying literature is both developmental and ideological. In the context of traditional literary studies at the university, literary literacy focuses on capacity to study literature in English and is largely determined by language and literary competence. The findings of this study show that broadening the definition of “literary literacy” to incorporate knowledge of the nature and context of learning is necessary. Preparation of teachers of literature must include pedagogical content knowledge. That has implications for university literature curricula.

Learning to teach literature must incorporate situated learning; contextualised practicum provides real learning experience for the student teacher. In the university classroom, the community of practice is an interpretive community of academics and students. Membership of this community through active participation is crucial for learning. Similarly, introducing the student teacher to the community of practice in schools is necessary and beneficial. Socio-cultural factors have implications for curriculum, practice and policy as it determines the purpose and motive, delivery and effect of education.

The complexities and dissonances experienced in the literary studies of participants in this study suggested that they were developing a concept of literary literacy relevant to their teaching of literature. It is important to sustain constructive concepts of literary literacy in which basic knowledge is transformed into comprehension to facilitate theory/practice integration of pedagogical content knowledge of literature.

Literary literacy in the Malaysian context might best be described as the intersection of:

- Language competence: sufficient level of proficiency in English;
- Literary competence: adequate knowledge of literature in English, moving beyond basic knowledge of literary terms and concepts toward understanding of literature in its broader sense, including curricula; and
- Pedagogical content knowledge: driven by comprehension of literature and awareness of the target learners, to construct ways of transforming content knowledge into practice.

A conceptual model for literary literacy is presented in Figure 2. Although derived from the perspectives of conversion and pre-service teachers of literature in Malaysia, with all of its cultural and linguistic complexities, it is argued that the model could be generalised more widely for the preparation of teachers of literature in English.

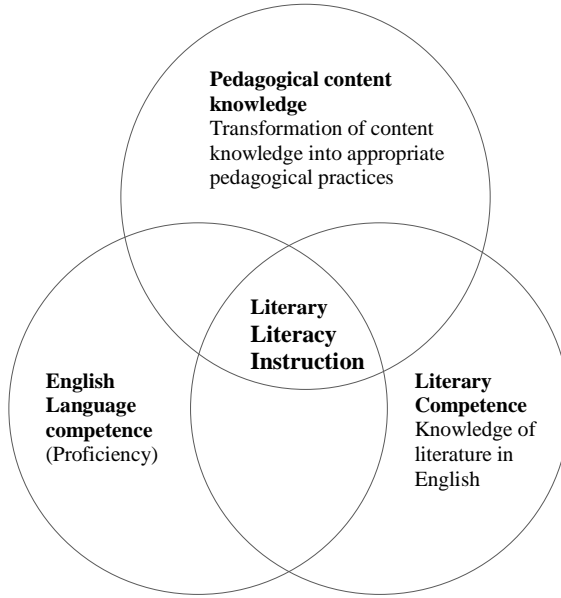


Figure 2: A conceptual model for literary literacy instruction

Pressures of internationalisation and globalisation and the ambition to compete as a developed nation in the global economy without jeopardising its agenda for national identity, unity and equality of opportunity have forced Malaysia to reconsider earlier language policies. The study reported here examined preparation of teachers of literature in English, as a subset of strategies implemented to address Malaysia's needs for more widespread and higher levels of English language competency. The findings of this study were reaffirmed in a survey that revealed that two-thirds of 70,000 English teachers in the country failed to reach a proficient English level on the Cambridge Placement Test and that two in three students failed to meet the basics in English proficiency based on comparison of the students' results in SPM English and Cambridge 1119 standards (The Star, September 26, 2012). Singh and Choo (2012), called for intervention to improve

English language proficiency at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. They emphasised the importance of English in everyday use to ensure that the teaching of English will respond to workplace demands in a globalised economy. The study reported in this paper identified the complexities of meeting such demands in Malaysia's culturally and linguistically diverse environment. Aspects of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2035 (Ministry of Education, 2012) resonate with the findings of this study:

- Upskilling English teachers and expanding opportunities for greater exposure to the language;
- Every student to be taught English by a teacher who is proficient according to international standards;
- Students to have greater exposure to the language, for example via an expanded, compulsory English Literature module at the secondary level;
- English is made a compulsory subject to pass for SPM from 2016; and
- Recognition that as a multilingual country, Malaysians needed to be bilingual, if not multilingual.

There has been no shortage of commentary since the launch of the Blueprint, or advice from sources such as the CfBT Education Trust on how the desired outcomes might be attained. The timeline for English to be a "compulsory pass" subject by 2016 seems remarkably short, given the research reported in this paper.

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