

Socio-historical transformation and classroom discourse in Malaysia

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to discuss Malaysian classroom practices, as seen through historical and socio-cultural lenses, and the classroom as a space where socio-historical transformation plays out. Malaysia's formal education system was largely based on a British colonial structure, and still today continues to maintain much of the system established during British colonial rule. Key socio-cultural building blocks also came into being during colonial times, but these have given way to decidedly more locally driven social-historical ideas since Malaysia's independence in 1957. We explore whether some of these social-historical changes could have contributed to the shaping of contemporary Malaysian classroom discourse. A previous study found that such discourse was almost entirely and persistently monologic, but why was monologic discourse so dominant and so homogeneously employed throughout the country? What goes into the shaping of such narrow displays of classroom discourse? This paper examines the socio-historical roots that may have shaped the monologic patterns of contemporary Malaysian classroom discourse. We argue that two far-reaching forces within the macrosystem contributed to shaping classroom practice over time: the first related to the underlying colonial and post-independence rule/government structure, and the second to Malaysia's particular socio-cultural character.

Keywords: classroom discourse; classroom practice; dialogism; socio-cultural and historical lens; Malaysia.

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1. Introduction

Nurturing the emerging individual voices should and must be part of the goal of learning in the classroom (Alexander, 2005). Each child's voice is original and unique, and closely corresponds to one's thinking, rich for its own perspective and consciousness (Bakhtin, 1981). Yet, the child's developing voice can be hampered within the spatial, temporal and interpersonal confines of a classroom (Alexander, 2005).

In largely monologic discourses, the child's voice becomes muted. A study of Malaysia's classrooms found that discourses were persistently monologic (Tan, Tee & Samuel, 2017). In the findings presented later in this paper, readers will see teachers leading and controlling the path of discussions, and students giving in to this control almost unquestioningly. Why were monologic discourses so dominant and so homogenously displayed throughout the country? What goes into the shaping of such narrow displays of classroom discourse? Everything from individual experiences, parental involvement to teacher training and formal curriculum structures could have contributed to the shaping of such classroom discourse (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This paper, however, intends to examine the largely monologic nature of classroom discourse in Malaysia from the vantage of historical and sociocultural developments that played out during British colonial rule and through the contemporary periods of independent state formation. In doing so, we explore the possible historical and sociocultural roots that may have contributed to the monologic patterns of Malaysian classroom discourse.

2. Conceptual Lenses

Three conceptual lenses formed the basis of the framework for this paper. The first is the metaphor of the classroom as a nexus-like space. The second – Bakhtin's notion of dialogism – is used as the lens through which to view this nexus-like reconceptualization of the classroom. The third identifies and describes the focal areas of this complex nexus – namely the historical and sociocultural movements – to allow for a more particularized examination of what may have shaped the nature of discourses in Malaysian classrooms. A more in-depth discussion of these lenses follows this paragraph.

2.1. *Classroom as nexus-like space*

The classroom can be seen from a container-like perspective on the one hand or it can be seen from a nexus-like perspective on the other (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991). If one sees the classroom as a container-like metaphor, then the classroom can be perceived as a space in which activity occurs somewhat independent of the world around it. Lefebvre's (1991) reconceptualization of a nexus-like space provides another perspective – that is, to view the classroom as a «complex of mobilities». This perspective, among other things, highlights the numerous in and out conduits that shape the space within. Lefebvre (1991, p. 93) used the house as a metaphor, illustrating that this space is shaped by permeation from every direction –

«streams of energy which run in and out of it by every imaginable route: water, gas, electricity, telephone lines, radio and television signals, and so on».

In this regard, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) social ecological systems model provides a broad overview of some of the in and out conduits that may shape the behaviours presented in the classroom. In the context of this model, the different elements within the mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem interact to shape the school and the classroom at the microsystem level. In the instance of this paper, a microsystem is defined as a system or a container where teacher-student interactions take place on a daily basis i.e. the classroom. The mesosystem consists of collections of microsystems that teachers interact with frequently, including the school administration and their peers. And these microsystems interact with the exosystem that may include the local and national bureaucracy, as well as the governing institutions. These entities interact with the macrosystem, which includes the attitude and ideologies of the culture shaped by the historical and sociological development of the nation. It is these historical and sociocultural developments that will be the focal points for a more particularized examination of what may have come to shape the nature of discourses in Malaysian classrooms.

A number of scholars have argued that an education system, its policies and pedagogical practices are heavily influenced by its national history as well as its sociocultural character (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; McCulloch, 2016; Samuel & Tee, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011; Lingard, 2010; Simola, 2005). Simola (2005, p.456-457), for example, states that «it is reasonable to suppose that schooling is not confined to pedagogy, didactics or subject matter, and that it also, even mainly, incorporates social, cultural, institutional and historical issues». He then goes on to provide a socio-historical journey that contributed to the pedagogical success of the Finnish comprehensive school. It is this socio-historical journey that this paper will focus on, albeit with a greater focus on examining how this journey may have come to shape classroom practice in contemporary Malaysia.

2.2. Dialogism and monologism in the classroom

Classroom discourse, in this paper, refers to the spoken communication within a classroom and was examined through the lens of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, and inversely, monologism. Within a dialogism framing, all thoughts and talk are primordially dialogical – this in the context of a classroom can be observed in terms of voice multiplicity and reciprocity in the speakers' discourses with one another (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984; Nystrand, 2004). Dialogic classrooms are often described as being filled with open exchanges of ideas and opinions among classroom participants while monologic classrooms are often associated with tightly controlled discourses dominated by the teacher (Lyle, 2008; Nystrand, 1997; Reznitskaya, 2012).

Primary in the notion of dialogism as emphasized in this paper are the emergence of students' voices within the pedagogic context of a classroom. Each voice is best represented when underlain by ongoing higher-order thinking processes (Alexander, 2005; Nystrand, 1997; Sedova, Salamounova & Svaricek, 2014) and all voices (the teacher and students), amidst their similarities and differences, are given

opportunities to be expressed and explored for enhanced shared understandings. This is to say neither the teacher nor any of the students is supposed to be the dominant voice, which would then lead to monologic classroom discourse where one is «deaf to the other's response ... pretends to be the ultimate word» (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). The teacher would refrain from being «someone who knows and possesses the truth» (p. 81) to instruct students who are often assumed to be in need of teaching and correction (Bakhtin, 1984). Rather, the teacher along with students, together negotiate and decide on the direction, content, and flow of classroom discourse (Reznitskaya, 2012; Shor & Freire, 1987).

2.3. *Historical and sociocultural background of Malaysia*

This aspect, as discussed earlier, is essential to identify and describe the focal areas in examining the complex nexus shaping classroom discourse. The socio-historical developments and character of a nation can be a major influence on what happens in the classroom (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; McCulloch, 2016; Samuel & Tee, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011; Lingard, 2010; Simola, 2005). Malaysia's socio-historical journey is uniquely enriched as well as complicated by Malaysia's diversity of people. It is a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural country. With a population of about 30 million people, 67 percent are Malays and other *Bumiputeras* (literally translated as «princes of the soil»), 25 percent are Chinese and 7 percent are Indians (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2011). The Malays form the largest Bumiputera group with almost 55 percent of the overall population. Other Bumiputeras – including indigenous groups such as Dayak, Iban and Kadazan – make up about 12 percent of the overall population (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2011). Each people group has contributed to the cultural and language diversity that exists in Malaysia today. Multiple languages are widely spoken throughout the country. On any given day on the streets of Malaysia, multiple languages and dialects may be spoken – sometimes within the same conversation (Samuel & Tee, 2013).

These diversities, can in large parts, be explained by the socio-historical developments that have occurred over the last 200 years. The British Empire began taking control of large swaths of present day Malaysia in the late 18th century, taking over from long periods of Dutch and Portuguese control that dates all the way back to early 16th century. To expedite the extraction of resources such as tin and rubber, the British had facilitated mass migrations of people from China and India. While outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to also note that different peoples from the broader region had begun settling in this area well before the arrival of the British due in parts to the busyness of the Straits of Malacca. But the scale of the migrations was larger under the British control – numbering in the hundreds of thousands depending on the economic and political conditions of the time. In fact, by 1931, the Chinese and the Indian combined population outnumbered the Malays (Wong & Ee, 1971). During the British heyday in what was then called Malaya just prior to World War II, it was reported that a mere 230 British officers administered the empire's interest in the area that had some 4.3 million inhabitants of Malays, Chinese, Indians and other Asians as the economy boomed with the exports of tin and rubber (Ooi, 2009). The British command-and-control structures worked well

for the empire's economic engine. The Pangkor Agreement, for example, dictated relations from the 1870s till the Second World War which on paper allowed a British officer-styled resident to act as an advisor to the Malay ruler but in reality, however, the resident administered the Malay state in the name of the sultan (Ooi, 2009). The structures of power and control were now in place.

By the time Malaya became independent from the British in 1957, the diverse and complex sociocultural fabric had already taken root, and in some ways so did the British command-and-control structures. Singapore briefly joined Malaysia in 1963, together with Sabah and Sarawak. Singapore went on to become an independent nation in 1965. The Federation of Malaysia today comprises the 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia (known as West Malaysia), the 2 states in Borneo (known as East Malaysia), and the federal territories. A strong federalist system took root, and within this system the national education policy and operational structures were put firmly under the control of the federal government.

Given this socio-historical backdrop, education in contemporary Malaysia has often been characterized as a nation-building tool to foster a sense of Malaysian-ness and nationalism (Samuel & Tee, 2013). While it has been argued that education is vital in the construction of a collective national identity, education is also used as a tool to promote the interests of specific groups, often by the powers in control of the political and economic landscape (Zervas, 2017; Jackson, 2017; Samuel & Tee, 2013; Brown, 2007). This occurred during British colonial rule, and has evolved into different shapes and forms in contemporary Malaysia – but one thing that has remained: power has resided in the few, and this power has been used to control the education system.

During the early periods of British colonial control, the British approach to education was *laissez faire* and this left the local communities to their own devices (Wong & Gwee, 1972). But over time, British-initiated structures of a fledgling formal education system began to take form – highlighted by the formation of some formal schooling, teacher training institutions, standardized curriculum, formal examinations, an inspectorate and later on, a department of education (Wong & Ee, 1971; Wong & Gwee, 1972). While there is evidence that there were humanitarian and sociological motives that dictated Britain's approach to education administration (Wong & Ee, 1971; Watson, 1982), there were also underlying reasons to maintain control of education developments in Malaya. Mangan's (1993, p.6) book, *The imperial curriculum: Racial images and education in the British colonial experience*, summarizes the function of the British Empire's overall strategy with education for their colonized areas:

A major purpose of this education was to inculcate in the children of the British Empire appropriate attitudes of dominance and deference. There was an education in imperial schools to shape the ruled into patterns of proper subservience and «legitimate» inferiority, and one in turn to develop in the rulers convictions about the certain benevolence and «legitimate» superiority of their rule. Imperial education was very much about establishing the presence and absence of confidence in those controlling and those controlled. Once colonial territories were established this process began in classrooms...The European

forced his way into the worlds of other peoples with epistemological models, representative symbols, alien forms of knowledge and patterns of action which he defined. In turn, these peoples had to reconstruct their worlds to embrace the fact of white domination and their own powerlessness...

Even after Malaysia had achieved independence from the British, the potential of education as a control tool remained in place. The essential structures set up by the British remained remarkably intact (Watson, 1982; Koh, 2017). New structures were added in, making education as a tool for control even more powerful. Under the new Federation, the Federal Government assumed legislative powers with respect to all levels of education to ensure a common policy and a common system in the process of nation building (Chai, 1977). Legislation and the trickle-down effect manifesting in local policies have disempowered the key actors within the education landscape (Samuel, Tee & Symaco, 2017).

Within the contemporary context, Malaysia's education system is considered one of the most centralized in the world (World Bank, 2013). OECD (2009) reported that school principals and teachers have very limited say in the selection of textbooks, assessment policies and admission policies. Selection and posting of teachers as well as salary structures are almost entirely done at the national and state level. This highly centralized system can and has been used as a lever for control for the use of the powerful (Bajunid et al, 2017; Ong, Abdullah, Tee & Samuel, 2017; Tan & Santhiram, 2017; Samuel & Tee, 2013; Brown, 2007).

For example, the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) has limited students' and educators' freedom of expression (Ong *et al.*, 2017). A law lecturer was charged under the Sedition Act merely for commenting on matters regarding a constitutional crisis in the state of Perak in 2009 which arose from a post-election stalemate (Malay Mail Online, 2014). Even teachers are limited in their voice, as can be seen with the expulsion of a teacher when he criticised and resisted the implementation of a new education policy (Malaysian Insider, 2015). A former deputy minister of higher education has reported that the dominant party in the ruling government has used schools as a basis for setting up new party branch offices (Ong et al, 2017). Such use of power presents an interesting paradox. On one hand, the government aspires towards a thinking and creative nation (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012), and on the other, the teachers and education administrators are expected to follow top-down orders (Bajunid *et al.*, 2017; Tee & Samuel, 2017).

The centralized power, and the use of power send explicit and implicit messages to teachers as well as to students. These messages can be significantly magnified within a cultural setting that can be characterized as being collectivist, hierarchical and non-confrontational. Researchers (Hofstede, 1980; Kennedy & Mansor, 2000) have found Malaysia to be high on collectivism and power distance. Culturally, status differences between individuals are clearly recognised and acknowledged, with passive obedience to superiors and elders. Most children in Malaysia, for example, are brought up to always comply with the request or instruction of an elder, and this has helped maintain a harmonious appearance within this collectivist culture. Confrontation, especially between the younger and the older, established authority is highly discouraged. This is also translated to classroom etiquette. Students are

expected to respect and follow the teacher's authority, even in circumstances where they may disagree or have differing views. These cultural dispositions present an expedient platform where the government – colonial or independent – can exert control in different ways, including in the curricular and pedagogical processes.

The aforesaid narratives provide a concatenated lens in which to examine the nature of classroom discourse in Malaysian classrooms.

3. The Study

Classroom data from over 1,500 minutes of video recordings were analyzed in detail to understand the nature of classroom discourse in Malaysian classrooms, specifically in English language classrooms. This data was drawn from a larger study (Tee, Samuel, Mohd Nor & Nadarajan, 2017). A random sample of schools was obtained from nearly 2,000 national secondary schools in Malaysia, where about 88 percent of Malaysian students go to (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). The eventual school sample included 17 schools (11 urban and 6 rural) from various states across the country. A total of 31 teachers teaching Year 7 English were recorded in-situ in their classrooms. In the recorded lessons, classroom discourse revolving around teacher-student interactions became the focus of analysis.

The current English Language Teaching in Malaysia has been broadly driven by the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, where the goal was for students to be critical individuals with developed communicative and language skills. For this paper, salient examples of teacher-student interactions – from lessons which were supposed to be filled with students' voices using the target language (i.e. English) – were presented for discussion. Extracts from a literature lesson, group presentation, whole-class discussion of a reading comprehension exercise, as well as other whole-class discussions (e.g. for exercises in worksheets) which could have provided increased opportunities for dialogic discourses compared to purely grammar-based lesson tasks, are included in this paper. Literature on the classroom as nexus-like space, dialogism and monologism, and historical and sociocultural background of Malaysia as discussed in the sections above provided the foundation and formed the conceptual lenses to try to understand what went on during classroom discourse in these lessons.

4. Findings

In all discourses, irrespective of the schools and the classrooms, the teacher was the dominant central figure. The teacher almost always had a strong and controlling presence. Such control and dominance were used to keep lessons going and discussions on track, often at the expense of allowing students' voices to emerge during discussions. In spite of regular students' involvement and participation during classroom discourse, teachers' facilitation almost never moved towards a dialogic platform in order to stimulate the development of students' thinking and to encourage the expression of students' voices. The rest of this section provides salient examples that epitomized the kinds of classroom discourse observed across the lessons examined.

As much as there was allowance for student responses during classroom discourse, there were even higher expectations for those responses to conform to a certain scheme, usually set by teachers or in accordance with the teaching and learning materials prescribed in the curriculum. These expectations would often be implied in teachers' avoidance/ignorance of unwanted responses or immediate acceptance of desired responses, or at times it could be as upfront as directing students to the location of the answer.

This was what happened in one of the lessons, during the discussion of a reading comprehension exercise in the textbook. Altogether there were six questions in the exercise which had been assigned earlier as homework. All questions were discussed one by one by the teacher with the students – the answers to the majority of them were closely textbook-based, with references to the textbook being made regularly or with the teacher asking the students to refer to the textbook, e.g. «Look at Part A. Can you see ... [the answer] ... so you underline the answer in the text ... write it down...» [Teacher1-20:39], «Can you get the answers from the text? Yes, the answers you can get from the text itself ... Look at the text» [Teacher1-24:57], «“Look at Paragraph B ... full stop until there [the answer stops there]...» [Teacher1-28:36]. As observed in these examples, the teacher kept emphasizing to the students the necessity to adhere to the textbook answer when completing the exercise. While referencing the textbook may be necessary, it is important to note that the limited room provided for students to discuss possible responses left little opportunity for dialogicality. The teacher's combined authority together with the de facto curriculum in the form of the textbook controlled the discussion from beginning to end. In doing so, the students were discouraged from straying away from the textbook structure. When discussing one of the questions, the same teacher reminded the students:

This answer you don't really have to think you know? Because it's given in the text [Teacher1-33:20].

In this exchange, not only did the teacher remind the students that it was not necessary for them to think about an answer but to extract it directly from the text, the teacher was also the one who eventually decided on the final answer. In other words, adherence to the textbook (i.e. the curriculum) and the teacher as the decision-maker was established by the teacher, and this was clearly accepted by the students. Throughout the discussion, the teacher was constantly reminding the students to take down the correct answers. Very early on in the discussion the teacher had already said «Okay, please check your answers. If your answers are different, write down the correct answers in the book...» [Teacher1-19:04]. This seemed to convey that «different» answers equaled wrong answers, and that only textbook and teacher-approved answers were the correct ones. Also at the beginning of the same discussion, the students were told that their examinations would be similar to this exercise, thus the whole manner of discussion implied the necessity for and importance of high adherence to the «scheme», in this case for examination sake.

In maintaining control on discourse progression, teachers often had to ensure minimal obstruction – for instance, elicitation of unwanted responses or students' inability to respond appropriately. Instead of discussing and evaluating possible

responses, teachers became committed to looking for desired responses from students. As a result, teachers often took over the entire discussion and vigorously fed answers to students whenever they deemed it necessary.

One such illustrative example occurred in a literature lesson. During this lesson, the students were asked to role-play important scenes in a literary text that they were studying. What could have been expected from such a task was the students' immersion into a piece of literary work via role play, and then discussing possible interpretations of the plot from different perspectives while considering the creative use of the language. While there was ample potential for dialogic engagement between the students and the literary text, as well as dialogic interaction between the teacher and the students through the task, none was realized. What happened instead was the display of superficial student autonomy given by the teacher, where the students were engaged in a state of answer-mimicking in a monologic manner. Instead of letting the students actively create their own dialogues and direct their own role plays, the teacher instructed the students in terms of the dialogues to use (repeated word-by-word by the students) and the actions to do. Students' voices were muted and drowned out. The extract below is one of the examples of teachers' control of classroom discourse; a student was following the teacher's instructions.

- Teacher: Then, then you say... ((explains to the student))
Understand?
You put up your hand ((raises hands))
Say «Yeah»
- Student: «Yeah» ((raises hands))
- Teacher: [Say] «I'm very happy» ...
- Student: «Yeah, I'm very happy» [Teacher2-29:36]

The teacher's mere direction did not seem to help the student and other students who were struggling with the task to get on with it. Rather, it drove most students to just follow rather thoughtlessly the teacher's instructions. Throughout this task, the students' meaning-making and exploration of expressive possibilities of language through the literary text were secondary to making sure that each student could play their part in the role play for the lesson to proceed. The teacher opted to dictate to the students what to say and what to do especially when they were having difficulties doing so on their own (rather than dialogically guiding and facilitating the students through the task). In most classrooms, teachers were often eager to obtain from students or reveal to students the desired answers.

Other than this, teachers' control of classroom discourse also went as far as to impose the «right» ideas or views on students. The three scenarios below illuminate how teachers behaved as the all-knowing figure (Bakhtin, 1984), a role which they also undoubtedly imposed on students without contest.

- Teacher: Proton Saga car is a national symbol.
Belongs to Malaysia only...
So we are all proud Malaysians.
Every one of us can buy car nowadays.

- Your family...
 At least two cars?
 We can afford, right?
 At least one [car]?
- Student: Yes.
 Teacher: Right?
 Okay, most of the time it is Proton Saga, Malaysian-made car right? [Teacher3-7:27]

In the extract above, the teacher took only one perspective – her own. She had complete control and authority in her class to do so. When talking about Proton Saga as the locally made national car and one of the national symbols of Malaysia, her perspective assumed that the majority of students and their family could afford at least one or two cars, while the students remained silent or just played along. Her perspective also imposed on the students that the cars bought were usually Proton Sagas – in reality, a statement that could be easily disputed. The dispute, as expected, never happened.

The final reference made about Malaysia's national car in the extract above signals the undercurrents of authority and expected institutional patriotism as layers emerging from the «complex of mobilities» (Lefebvre, 1991) shaping the classroom character. The teacher is the immediate authority in the classroom, but there also seems to be an invisible higher authority influencing this classroom discourse – namely, the syllabus that stipulates the cultivation of «patriotism» (Khairi Izwan bin Abdullah, Wee & Teo, 2011) and the advancement of national symbols. However, what comes across is a kind of forced patriotism which garnered little reaction from the students. There is a tendency to defer to higher levels of a hierarchy: students defer to teachers, and teachers defer to other forms higher in the hierarchy (e.g. syllabus, country-related representations and institutional expectations). Similar patterns are seen again in the following extract.

- Teacher: So today we have learned about ... Malaysia, right?
 Okay, do you love Malaysia?
- Students: No. / Yes.
- Teacher: ((to «no» responses)) That's so cruel [to our country Malaysia].
- Student: I love Japan.
- Teacher: Okay, you love Japan. ((nods)) ...
 Eh, you should love Malaysia.
 Very peaceful country. [Teacher4-43:23]

Here, the teacher seemed to be unprepared when some students responded «no» to the question if they loved their country, Malaysia. One student even said he loved Japan. Instead of discussing their reasons for saying such, the teacher issued what seemed to be a directive: «...you should love Malaysia». The teacher, apparently caught off guard and unprepared to dialogue with the students based on their various perspectives on their country and other countries, simply took control of the discourse and said what she felt needed to be said. Again, the students' views

were not explored to enrich the discussion but instead were quickly shut down using the teacher's authority and following strictly her views towards the topic, and the lesson ended thereafter, without further discussion. The love for a country, the teacher seemed to assume, can be a matter to be directed and controlled.

This becomes even more apparent in the following sequence, where the focus was on the government and not just the nation:

- Teacher: This government, good or not? ...
Our government, good or not? ...
Our government, good or bad?
- Student: Good, teacher.
Good.
- Teacher: Good. ((gives a thumbs-up sign))
Because we don't have to pay examination fees. ...
[Last time we] had to pay fees. ((gives some examples of fees))
Now, all is free, the government pays.
So, the government is good or bad?
- Students: ((unintelligible)) / Good.
- Teacher: Bad? ((prompts the students))
- Student: No, [the government is] good, teacher.
- Teacher: Good.
The government is good.
You don't have to pay anymore examination fees.
[Teacher5-19:43] [parts of the discourse were translated from the Malay language].

In the discourse shown, the teacher was evidently more intent to obtain the students' agreement than to listen to the students' views in relation to the discussion at hand. The sequence of questions (all revolving around the government being good or bad) was another display of the use of teachers' control on classroom discourse to convey their own perceptions and to achieve their intended purpose of discourse.

This kind of control was also in use when teachers were not well versed with the topic. In the face of uncertainties or deviations, control is used by teachers to keep the discourse within their comfort zone. In the next sequence, you will see a teacher using her established authority to lead the discussion to a meaningless dead-end in large parts because the teacher did not quite know the answer to a factual question.

In this next scenario, a few students were doing their group presentation on the dangers of rivers. When the students presented the point on «crocodiles» the teacher began questioning its validity: were there crocodiles in Malaysian rivers? Later, another student of the class responded with the Bernam River as an example (Sinar Harian, 2014). Other rivers in Malaysia, for instance in Sarawak (East Malaysia), have about 20,000 crocodiles (The Star Online, 2017). Unsure of this topic, the teacher used a skepticism-filled and interrogation-like tactic in leading the discussion:

- Teacher: ...which river has a crocodile?
Can I know which river? ...
Which river has crocodiles?
...name me one river in Malaysia got crocodile...
- Student: Bernam River.
- Teacher: Do you think this is the Amazon River? ...
«Bernam»? ((some students laugh))
Ah, okay, okay. [Teacher6-5:40] [parts of the discourse were translated from the Malay language].

The teacher's tone especially in the beginning suggested that the students were wrong – that rivers in Malaysia had no crocodiles, leading to the teacher 'challenging' the students as seen in the first six lines above. Towards the end however, the teacher somehow started to lose assertiveness but did not open up about the uncertainty faced or give opportunities to the students to further discuss this topic. During this task, the students were asked to do a presentation, but their ideas were not built on for any discussion. In the end, the teacher seemed to implicitly accept that there were crocodiles in Malaysian rivers and briefly commented on other aspects of the students' presentation, before calling upon the next group of students to present. The discussion was stopped short using the teacher's authority. The encouragement and development of students' voices did not happen. In fact, it was not unusual for teachers to try to avoid discussions which could possibly threaten their superior position should they navigate classroom discourse outside the scope of their knowledge.

Observed throughout, teachers' control and authority in the classroom were never seriously challenged or threatened. As a matter of fact, with the exception of students with disciplinary issues, there was hardly any attempt by students to express or negotiate ideas with teachers to deepen or advance classroom discourse. In almost all contexts of discourse, there was strong students' submission to teachers, which in a way continued to feed monologicality in the classroom. At the same time, firm control and authority from the teachers' side continued posing heightened challenges for the emergence of more substantive students' role during classroom discourse, in relation to their thinking and voices.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The teacher in Malaysia has much established authority in his or her classroom. The teacher exerted control to the point that significantly limited dialogicality in the classroom. In more than 1,500 minutes of classroom data analysed, discourses in classrooms showed virtually no characteristics of dialogicality. While there can be various interacting reasons for this to happen, this paper attempted to examine this phenomenon through the conceptual lenses discussed earlier, namely to look at classrooms as a «complex of mobilities» – particularly, through a socio-historical lens – that can impact the kind of discourse that occurs in classrooms throughout the country.

Given the homogeneity of monologicality in Malaysian classroom discourse, we suggest that there is a systemic influence on classroom practices in Malaysia. Amongst the many mobilities, or the in and out conduits that shape a classroom, we looked particularly at the macro conduits that have the capacity to influence the entire country. In this regard, we think a country's shared history and sociocultural practices can be powerful conduits shaping classroom behaviours that become consistent and persistent throughout the country (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; McCulloch, 2016; Samuel & Tee, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011; Lingard, 2010; Simola, 2005). It is for this reason that we looked at the findings from a socio-historical vantage point. In other words, using the language of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) model, the nation's macrosystem can exert consistent and persistent influences on the entities in the exosystem and mesosystem, and the microsystems to the point that a national «discourse pattern» emerges in the classrooms. So, regardless of where the classrooms were – whether in an urban or a rural school, in a big or a small school, in different geographical areas, with different teachers and different students – discourses that took place within classrooms were consistently and persistently monologic in nature.

We suggest two broad mobilities within the macrosystem that have shaped the classroom practice overtime. Firstly, the underlying colonial and post-independence ruling or governing structure. Secondly, the sociocultural character of the Malaysian people.

5.1. Colonial and post-independence ruling or governing structure

Since the early 16th century up to mid-20th century, the region in what is now known as Malaysia was subject to colonial control. The Portuguese and Dutch ruled the area till about the 18th century. The British took over and ruled the area for nearly 200 years. The British, in particular, played the most significant role in shaping the education and sociocultural (this aspect to be discussed in the next section) foundations that continue to exist in Malaysia today. In fact, the hard and soft education structures set up by the British have remained essentially intact (Watson, 1982; Koh, 2017). The neo-colonial influence can still be seen in the way the education system is being governed in present day Malaysia, including the curriculum and examination structures (Watson, 1982). Till today, there is still a strong affinity towards elements of British education, including the international version of the O-levels, the A-levels and British university qualifications (Koh, 2017). But perhaps one of the most persistent structures and value-systems that has remained from the British colonial era is the top-down administrative structure. Within the federal system since the independence of Malaya (1957) and the formation of Malaysia (1963), the education system is directly under the purview of the federal government. The cabinet minister for education (a direct appointee of the Prime Minister) and his office make all the major education decisions, which are then trickled down to the relevant state and local agencies for implementation. As discussed in Section 2.3, principals and teachers are expected to carry out their duties as directed by the top hierarchies. Hiring of teachers and choosing of textbooks, for example, are almost entirely carried out at the central level. The Malaysian education system today has become one of the most centralized in the world (World Bank, 2013). This leads to an inconvenient paradox:

The teachers are expected to teach their students to be critical and reflective, but the teachers themselves are asked to uncritically carry out every new government directive (Bajunid *et al.*, 2017; Tee & Samuel, 2017). Despite recent attempts to be more inclusive in their decision making (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012), the culture of following orders as directed is still dominant. This paradox is not only inconvenient, but also inoperable – as can be seen in the findings described above. At the classroom level, students' voices are muted. At the state and national levels, teachers' voices are muted. The nation and its top administrators have laudable goals for Malaysia's education system (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012), but without inspiring and facilitating a more professional and empowered environment for teachers that allows for differing views and a greater sense of ownership, these goals will only remain just that – stated but unattainable goals.

The focus in non-western and developing countries in new comparative politics in the 1950s has pushed for the corresponding theory of modernization in light of recognizing and understanding the tendency to 'modernize' in such states. The ethnocentric bias however and the conformation of the historical background of the developing world to that of the West are noted (Preston, 1996) and reinforced by Macaulay's recommendation of creating an Indian Civil Service as «a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect» (as cited in Bernstein, 1971, p. 147). In Malaysia, the idea of the modern «nation state» explicitly harnessed by colonial knowledge continues to this day through the education sector, where then the expansion of public education is how «facts ... were channelled to the younger population; in this process governments directed the people's perception on how social reality was organized» (Shamsul, 2001, p. 361).

Working within the classroom nexus and expanding identity formation as confined within two (but contrasting) social realities perchance explains the dynamics in the Malaysian context. Where the «everyday-defined» social reality is experienced, in contrast to the «authority-defined» social reality which is «observed and interpreted, and possibly imposed» and where both are «mediated through the social position of those who observe and interpret social reality and those who experience it» (see Shamsul, 2001, p. 365). Given the social influence of the government on its populace, the manifestations of the country's broader political and cultural realities are reflected, seemingly more in public school classroom practices. Where the authority-defined social reality of the teachers is imposed on the students, the former is similarly displayed by the government given the country's highly centralized system. This has a ripple effect on students, which diminishes the ideal practice of everyday-defined social reality in classrooms, which eventually leads to a cyclical process of thinking in knowledge formation, among others, when the students eventually assume leading roles in society.

5.2. *Sociocultural character of the Malaysian people*

Looking at the basic classroom hierarchy which to a large extent mirrors the nature of societal hierarchy in the country, it is crucial to point out that the higher hierarchy in the classroom (i.e. teachers) were not just born into their position, in fact

they had to go through the lower hierarchy in the classroom (i.e. students) as well. Many of the teachers who went through the same education system in Malaysia were once students who also viewed teachers as the authority and deferred to this control. Nonetheless when stepping into the other side of the hierarchy, from being students to being teachers, teachers displayed few difficulties in assuming authoritarian characteristics during classroom discourse. Interestingly, at different time or settings, one can dutifully be an obedient student or also comfortably be an authoritarian, monologic teacher. This reflects the cyclic set roles and expectations for each hierarchy level, and more importantly the faithful submission to and execution of this structure.

In many ways, this hierarchical arrangement can not only be attributed to the political entities of the British colonial control or the political elite that have governed Malaysia since independence. The sociocultural traits of Malaysia's people seem to have provided a fertile ground for a top-down system to persist and manifest in different forms. Not discounting that children's experiences might not always be linear, the socioecological model presented earlier gives a broad explanation of the external influences that affect influences within schools in Malaysia. The general Asian characteristic of passive submission (Ho & Ho, 2008) as reflected in among others, the school classroom setting, supports some of the sociocultural values inherent in the country. Broadly defining a «national character», an extensive review of literature long ago by Inkeles and Levinson (1969) on such (limited to culture at the level of nations) highlighted «standard analytic issues», two of which relate to the concept of relation to authority, and the conception of self. These two standard analytic issues were then empirically supported by a study done by Hofstede two decades on (see Hofstede, 2011) of which one of the dimensions in the said study refers to the power index ranking, where Malaysia scores the highest among selected countries in South East Asia. When applied to the school backdrop, this power distance index signals unqualified respect to authorities such that «students in class speak up only when invited to; teachers are never publicly contradicted or criticized» (Hofstede as cited in Trakulphadetkrai, 2011). This further strengthens the likelihood of monologism in classrooms as evident in the classroom discourse presented earlier.

The less than enlivened narrative evident in the Malaysian classrooms creates vulnerability in achieving a transformative potential in societies when monologism is engaged and a genuine dialogue is shunned. This is similar to Freire's concept of «banking education» where students are simply «receiving, filing, and storing» knowledge, and where «knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing» (Freire, 2000, p. 72). This traditional view of pedagogical technique does away with the transformative and participatory learning environment critically needed to support the development of thinking individuals.

From a critical perspective, the limits of a genuine dialogue to actual autonomy of an individual (see Foucault, 2003; Sarid, 2014) is acknowledged where the 'practices of the self' in which individuals respond or conduct themselves are entwined with paradigms that are suggested and enforced by one's culture and social group (Foucault, 2003). And while sociocultural practices are difficult to

change, which in this case assumes Malaysia's highly centralized and conformist nature, such structure can be exploited to initiate well-informed systematic reform (see Simola, 2005; Sahlberg, 2011). The ability for dialogical education to transform or restructure the power and authority dimensions in the classroom gives chance to an egalitarian and participatory setup that is otherwise lacking. Achieving dialogical learning in schools also allows one to «meet the other and actually listen, hearing the words and encountering the other in a way that puts one's own idea into question» (Keller, 2011, p. 32). This social context goes beyond the Foucauldian perspective, it initiates and provides 'education for dialogue' which prevents «dogmatism by which one's own tribe or even one's own self becomes the sole bearer of humanity and truth» (ibid, p. 33).

Breaking away from the narrow and often ethnocentric version of schooling will promote and help create «thinking» students who are able to adapt to the need of a globalized world. This will also bring severance from the facet of power distance of which is «defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders ... bred in its families through the extent to which its children are socialized toward obedience or toward initiative» (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004, p. 62). The liberating practice of a dialogic type of education allows for authentic self-creation where «authority is based not on subordination but on cooperation» (Arnett, 1993, p. 96), and only when learners are granted a voice can they truly make a difference and become active players on the global stage.

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