

Shared Identity Construction: The Third Space Exploration

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Abstract

Ethnic and cultural tension and conflicts have escalated in Malaysia bringing undesirable impacts on the nation's economy and, most importantly, on inter-ethnic relationships. Thus, this study proposes the need to construct a shared Malaysian identity, starting from the classroom, which is facilitated by teachers through the use of short stories written by Malaysians. The study is grounded in the notion of hybridity in the Third Space espoused by Bhabha (1994) and ameliorated and geared towards the classroom context by the works of Gutierrez (1999, 2004, 2008). The inquiry was designed using primarily qualitative research instruments with 7 English Language teachers, and group interviews with 6 groups of students from 4 different schools in Kuala Lumpur. The findings from the analyses of the results show various attitudes, beliefs and teaching and practices in the English language classroom in response to the notion of constructing a shared identity in the Third Space.

Keywords: identity construction, shared identity, short stories in language classroom, The Third Space, hybridity, collaborative engagement

1.0 Exploring the Third Space to construct shared Malaysian identity

Malaysia is generally noted as a harmonious and tolerant society. However, ethnic conflicts had escalated for the past 5 years (Idrus, 2012). Since ethnic-related issues have been highlighted in Malaysia's recent news, some common elements are likely to be needed that could bind the people together. With a common shared Malaysian identity, members of the broader community are able to identify themselves more closely with each other, thus creating abundant opportunities to interact, developing a strong and integrated society.

To initiate this, school is the best place to start, because it creates a level playing field for all students as the home environment may not be conducive for inter-ethnic communication. Therefore it is crucial for the teachers and school administrators to help students understand the importance of understanding friends from other backgrounds and to cultivate and promote a positive atmosphere in schools in order to have more successful and effective inter-ethnic interactions and communication. Thus, this study investigates the ways in which a sense of shared identity can be developed in secondary literature classroom. In so doing, the notion of hybridity and the Third Space are explored in that they are linked to how participants in this study construct their shared identity.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Negotiating the Complex Construct of Identity

The question raised in this investigation is to find out whether Malaysians do need a shared identity in order to function properly as a society and nation or, indeed, is such a shared identity a real possibility?

Inevitably, shared identity is significantly related to having shared values and practices, which as far as Malaysians are concerned, is arduous due to the multiple nature of the country with its various languages, cultures and religions.

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If these shared practices need modifications in terms of religious beliefs and cultural practices and values (and these values are vital in the case of multi-racial and multicultural Malaysia), then it is almost impossible to arrive at a destination for shared Malaysian identity. What then will be the basis of shared Malaysian identity? Some of the archetypes of a physical foundation for collective identity are exemplified in the analysis of the findings of this investigation through students' classroom collaborative engagement and group interviews.

One of the significant features of identity formation is the use of language (Lee, 2003). Students in the classroom use language to engage in various learning tasks and to identify and transform their 'selves' while constructing and reconstructing their identities to fulfil the demands of peers, teachers and others in the learning environment. Language is a tool which people use to express themselves and make sense of their surroundings and experiences. Thus, it is an instrument to transform our thinking.

Students' shared identity development, I believe, is influenced by their access to various forms of language use and learning engagement that require various ways of participating in classroom activities and is also affected by the selected materials used. Thus, the diffusion of language, materials, space and approaches transforms conventional classroom environment to that of a hybrid (convergence of different elements in the classroom learning environment such as bringing to it the knowledge of home and community) which, if sufficiently explored, could be the impetus for the construction of shared identity.

2.2 What is Shared Malaysian Identity (SMI)?

Shared Identity which is also referred to as collective identity in this study, refers to a set of individuals' sense of belonging to the group they belong to. It is the idea that through participating in social activities individuals could gain a sense of belonging and in essence an 'identity' that surpass the individuals. From the perspective of the individual, the shared identity forms a part of his personal identity. Thus, my aim was to examine the possibilities of constructing shared identity amongst young adults in Malaysia which basically ranged from the age of 15-18 years old. The main purpose of having a shared identity amongst the varying ethnic groups of youth in Malaysia was to enable them to work closer with each other despite their cultural and religious backgrounds so as to fuse and glue the spirit of togetherness as Malaysians not as Malays, Chinese, Indian or any other ethnic backgrounds. This is crucial as the future of the country lies in the hands of these youth and with the government's aspiration to transform the country from developing to fully developed nation in 2020, this shared Malaysian identity construction has never been so crucial.

2.3 The concept of hybridity

The concept of hybridity lies at the heart of my argument about the Third Space. It shapes and supports the grounds upon which shared identity construction can be made possible through teachers' increased and explicit awareness of the existence of the Third Space in teaching and learning. Moje et al (2004) define Third Space as an integration of 'knowledges and Discourses'¹ that are drawn from the first space (home and community) and second space (school and classroom). This possibility relates to the tensions and conflicts in various aspects of Malaysian society due to differences in values and beliefs, religion, language and myriad of other tiny yet significant aspects of everyday life; for instance, in the food choice related closely to religious observance. These conflicts have long been witnessed, and contested. By recognising that a complex domain such as the Third Space can be conceptualised, conflicts and differences can be transformed into 'rich zones' (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Tejeda, 1999) of collaboration and learning. Thus, the construct of the Third Space in the realm of the notion of hybridity can be advantageous in helping individuals to understand the intricacies of a multicultural environment and the potential for transformation and adaptation.

Hybridity arises from the flow of information and the movement of people around this ever-evolving, interconnected and interactive world. It has been a profound aspect of the creation of new cultures through the mixing of local and foreign ideas and values. In the colonial discourse, hybridity has been used as a term of abuse for those who are products of miscegenation or mixed-breeds. Such mixing is a tiny part of the loose and slippery meaning of the term 'hybridity'.

¹ Gee (1990:142) uses 'Discourses' with a capital 'D' which refers to more than just language [...] forms of life which integrate words, acts values, beliefs, attitude, social identification etc.

This study locates hybrid practices in everyday classroom activities which could be the mainspring for the construction of shared Malaysian identity. Therefore, the concept of hybridity is useful in addressing the problematic nature of managing the differences in cultural, ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia's pluralistic society in general, and specifically in the classroom context, in the quest for the construction of shared Malaysian identity. Thus the discussion of hybridity in the Malaysian classroom context in this study is not about finding an alternative pedagogy, or changing the existing Malaysian literature classroom context; rather it is about highlighting the advantages of being able to recognise the existence of different types of hybridity in the classroom, which could promote the construction of shared Malaysian identity. Having an awareness of the usefulness of hybrid cultures, narratives and language, teachers and students can identify a space where cultural, religious and ethnic beliefs amidst 'difference' can be mutually understood and experienced.

One feature of a post-colonial nation such as Malaysia is that it produced hybrid languages due to the mixing of not one but many distinct languages. As Malaysia's multicultural society evolves, languages evolve in tandem. The discussion of language hybridity here involves the emergence of Colloquial Malaysian English or 'Manglish' (LaPonce, 1987; Rajadurai, 2004; Young, 2009) which developed in the social interactions within the ethnic community or with other communities. Besides Manglish, other hybrid languages have appeared in Malaysian societies that have fused the different languages spoken in everyday communication. One example is the mixture of Malay and Javanese which is called 'JawaPasar' (literally the marketplace Javanese).

2.4 The Significance of the Hybridity Concept in this Study

Hutnyk, Kalra and Kaur (2005) assert that '*hybridity is better conceived of as a process rather than a description*' (p.71), and they further maintain that as multicultural society evolves, the process of hybridisation develops and progresses alongside the people and society.

Along the same line, the essentialist view that the process of hybridisation weakens the fabric of a society as pure culture becomes diluted is a weak assumption and has become almost a myth. This also assumes culture is static, not dynamic, therefore doomed to die. On the contrary, the mixing of migrant and the local (host and guest) cultures has been advantageous and constructive for socio-economic development and the progress of shared identity. Bhabha (1990:211) reminds us of the importance of hybridity:

...the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge.

Thus, the emergence of this new position sets up a new structure and power basis to be understood and experienced by the new hybrid culture of a society.

This study explores the hybrid classroom consisting of students from different cultural and language backgrounds, in that the language used in the literature classroom (the English language) is a second language for almost everyone. Any anxiety students may have felt, I believe, would be in having to compete with each other to achieve higher grades. Moje and colleagues (2004) attest that prescribed academic texts used in the classroom may, to a considerable extent, impede students' learning, as they stifle teachers' creativity in text explorations, which may also be so in the Malaysian classroom context.

2.5 What is the Third Space?

The focus of the Third Space used in this study is on the construction of shared Malaysian identity in the literature classroom through the utilisation of selected Malaysian short stories. The aim is to identify productive learning spaces during the process of teaching and learning within the classroom setting. One of these spaces involves the use of hybrid texts². The aim is to encourage critical thought facilitated by some Malaysian short stories, understood as mediational tools in this space, in what Gutiérrez (2004:150) claims is a '*...hybrid text with several seemingly contradictory or inharmonious conventions and practices*'. Hybrid texts in this context can harness or draw on knowledge and experience of teachers and learners from home or their communities (informal context) to the classroom (formal institutional context), which can be exploited to enhance learning.

² Snell-Horby (1999) maintains that hybrid texts are texts which involve 'new languages' and elements ranging from lexical and grammatical innovation to culture-bound items

Although discussing the Third Space from a variety of platforms, these scholars (Moje et al. and Gutiérrez et al.) all see the Third Space as a hybrid space where the ‘first’ and ‘second’ space coalesce (DeMont, 2010). English (2005:87) claims the word ‘Third’ refers to ‘*the constructing and reconstructing of identity, to the fluidity of space.*’ She further explains that the word ‘Third’ indicates the location where negotiation occurs and where identity is constructed and reconstructed. The Third Space acts as a defence to regulating, rigid views and presents a way of seeing things differently as it becomes the viewers’ own space (Ibid, 2005).

Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Turner’s (1997) school-based research, links the Third Space in their study to shifts in knowledge and knowledge representation whereby the Third Space can become a common ground so that the interests of the teachers and students are available to each other. They see the Third Space construct as beneficial in helping teachers understand the intricacies and complexities of learning environments and their transformative potential.

Moje and associates’ (ibid) concept of the Third Space fits well with the present study whereby the Third Space provides an avenue through which the utilisation of Malaysian short stories (the unofficial texts) in the literature classroom can help students and teachers construct their own (pleasant or unpleasant) experiences of ‘reality’ in society. These experiences can differ from those generated by the demands of the official curriculum where students extract and write about the characters, plot and the values of prescribed texts to enable them to answer examination questions.

Hybridity theory thus is valuable in that it connects to the Third Space because ‘*Third Spaces are hybrid spaces that bring people together*’ (ibid). Thus, in the present study, the hybrid spaces are not only the availability of groups of students from different cultural backgrounds in what could be conceived as ‘convenient hybridity’ in the classroom, but also the active introduction of Malaysian short stories (induced hybridity) in the integration and amalgamation of knowledge from the official and unofficial curriculum. Convenient hybridity mentioned above carries the meaning of the readily available multicultural students in a classroom. In this study, students from different backgrounds are not taken from several schools but are all in one single school. This aspect of convenient hybridity is akin to the convenience sampling technique when carrying out research. Induced hybridity, on the other hand, is the ‘planned’ hybridity in which the Malaysian short stories are used. The induced hybridity is to optimise responses from the participants, so ‘familiar ground’ is chosen to induce reciprocity.

3.0 Methods

This study was designed using the qualitative research instruments of semi-structured interviews with selected teachers, group interviews with students and also non-participant classroom observations. 2 phases of data collection were carried out. Workshops were also executed with teachers involved. The aim was for the teachers to be able to share their experiences of literature teaching and also to introduce them to new Malaysian short stories. A purposeful sampling of 7 English Language teachers from 4 secondary schools around Kuala Lumpur and their students was carried out. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 7 teachers and group interviews with 6 groups of students consisting of 6 students each. The second round of data collection process consisted of semi-structured interviews with the 7 teachers (after 6 months had elapsed since the first classroom observations). Teachers were asked to reflect on their literature lessons after the introduction of the Malaysian short stories. Tables 1 below shows the number of teachers involved in this study.

Table 1: Total number of teachers and instruments (pre-workshop)

| | Teachers | Ethnicity | School | Instruments |
|----|----------|-----------|--------|-------------|
| 1. | NA | Malay | TTDI | Obs |
| 2. | SH | Indian | TTDI | SSI |
| 3. | PL | Chinese | WM5 | SSI, Obs |
| 4. | RA | Indian | WM5 | SSI, Obs |
| 5. | SR | Malay | WM2 | SSI, Obs |
| 6. | NR | Malay | WM2 | SSI, Obs |
| 7. | AN | Indian | CS | Obs |
| 8. | SL | Chinese | SJI | SSI, Obs |
| 9. | FN | Malay | PU1 | SSI, Obs |

Key: Obs- Observations SSI: Semi-structured Interviews

Seven observations with each of the teacher were carried out before and after the one-day workshop respectively. The choice of short stories available for the teachers to choose from are: 'The Deep Fried Devils' (by a Chinese author, Shih-Li Kow,), 'Ah Khaw goes to heaven' (by a Malay author A. Samad Ismail), 'Peach Blossom Luck' (by Chua Kok Yee, Shih-Li Kow (Chinese) and Rumaizah Abu Bakar (Malay)) and 'Nannan' (by Cynthia Anthony, an Indian writer). All the stories were written in the English language.

4.0 Analysis of Findings

Table 3 below shows the number of groups involved in the group interviews.

Table 2: Group Interviews with students

| | Group Interviews | Descriptions |
|----|------------------|--------------|
| 1. | SJI | One group |
| 2. | WM5 | Two groups |
| 3. | WM2 | Two groups |
| 4. | PU1 | One group |

4.1 Student interactions during lessons (Pre-Workshop Non-Participant Observation)

The most apparent dearth throughout the classes observed was the group or pair work essential for getting the students to communicate and interact with each other, and to get students from different backgrounds to collaborate with each other more effectively. Out of the seven teachers, only three had group work planned for their lessons and only two carried out pair work with the students. Two teachers let students work individually while completing tasks while the rest carried out whole class teaching for almost their entire lessons. Table 3 below shows the approaches or strategies teachers used in their lessons during the pre-workshop observations.

Table 3: Approaches teachers used in lessons during pre-workshop observations

| Teacher | Whole class teaching | Individual work | Pair work | Group work |
|---------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| PL | √ | √ | √ | X |
| RA | √ | X | X | X |
| FN | √ | X | X | √ |
| SR | √ | X | √ | √ |
| SL | √ | √ | X | X |
| SN | √ | X | X | √ |
| AN | √ | X | X | X |

It seems to indicate that the teachers were more comfortable carrying out whole class teaching throughout all the lessons, more so than putting students into groups or encouraging pair work to induce more interaction between them. After each lesson, the teachers were asked their reasons for opting for a whole class teaching approach during. In my notes I wrote:

No group work for this lesson as the teacher said that this was just a 40-minute lesson and she normally would have group work during a double period lesson. Moreover, the class was in the chemistry lab, so it was difficult to organize group work with a lot of apparatus around. (PrePL)

4.2 Student interactions during lessons (Post-Workshop Non-Participant Observations)

The post-workshop observations were aimed to see how students responded to the selected narratives depicting some common inter-cultural misconceptions which still occur in Malaysian society.

PL selected 'The Deep Fried Devils' and used it with her students. In order to optimise inter-ethnic interaction, PL started off by asking her students to form groups of six, consisting of members from different ethnic groups. In my notes I wrote:

Students were absolutely engrossed in their discussion with their group members and I could see that everyone was interested to hear what others had to say and then gave their own opinion of the matter discussed. This was totally the opposite scenario to what I had seen when I first came into this classroom where students had fewer interactions with each other. They also managed to get cultural input from group members about the food, 'Char Kwai', which was quite unknown to some. (PostPL)

PL's students seemed to be motivated and confident, and enjoyed themselves throughout the lesson. It was worth noting that the motivation came from the stimulus provided by PL, which was the text. The story drew their attention, thus motivating them to participate fully. Familiar scenarios sparked their confidence and ability to contribute to the discussion. Motivation, confidence and ability are considered part of the learning dimension (Butler & Lumpe, 2008; Wu & Marek, 2010) and are closely interrelated. The Deep Fried Devils had certainly triggered these dimensions.

The conclusion that can be drawn from these classroom observations is that teachers are able to make their lessons interactive if they choose to make the required efforts for achieving this. They are able to turn normal, linear classroom teaching into less constricted activities that captured the students' attention. There were striking differences in students' reactions before and after the workshop. In the pre-workshop observations, teachers in their day to-day lesson did not encourage student interaction, but taught in order to meet the objective of their lesson that particular day. In the observations after the workshop, on the whole, the students seemed to enjoy working together with their peers, regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

4.3 Students' Perspectives

One of the main issues discussed was the students' relationship with one another in and outside the classroom. The students were asked to discuss about working together with their friends from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds and also the problems that they had encountered or perceived as barriers to the idea of working collaboratively.

A Malay student (NN) commented:

There are a lot of people who still believe in being 'racist'. They normally will only be found among the same race as themselves. For example, Chinese with Chinese, Indians with Indians and so on. They also practice racism even amongst the Malays. For example, my friend who is in a boarding school told me that the Kelantanese [a person who comes from the state of Kelantan] only wants to mix with students who come from Kelantan and they speak their own dialect and keep to themselves. (PU 52 F,M)

NN's experience could be attributed to differences in perspectives and '*different access of thoughts*' (Dovidio et al., 2000) by people around her and/or the speaker herself. Therefore there is the potential for bias emerging from a conversation without the respondent being aware of this.

4.4 Relationship with others from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds

Students' surroundings can have a large influence on their attitude towards others. In IR's case above, his experience of being able to interact with many people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds proved an advantage as he was very positive about making friends, regardless of their background. Students generally felt that they were part of the community regardless of ethnicity. KT from WM5L said that he and his other Malay friends had been friends since they were in their primary years and that they felt perfectly 'at home' with their peers. There was, however, a tiny fraction of students who felt otherwise. They said that being susceptible to being in similar ethnic backgrounds with other students sometimes could not be helped as they felt much more at ease and that it was easier to communicate with and understand each other. This was strengthened by the composition of a larger majority of Malay students in every school compared to Indian and Chinese students. KL from NMC commented:

Normally in a Malaysian environment, the Malays will stick to the Malays and vice versa. It's rare to see that they really mix with others. Probably they are so used to having their own kind around and feel much more at ease. (NMC 08 F, M)

The response above is an example of how interactions between and among students of diverse backgrounds may fail to develop if there is no intervention from the teacher to rationalise the importance of working together despite cultural and ethnic background differences. Based on the discussions above, it was evident that not all students were comfortable being around students from other ethnic backgrounds. It can be deduced that the environment plays a very important part in students' inclination or otherwise to being around and interacting with friends from different ethnic backgrounds.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Collaborative engagement to construct shared identity

The construction of shared knowledge, a possible prerequisite of a shared identity, requires students to negotiate with other individuals or groups of people. Researchers have shown that collaborative work between students and their peers and also with their teachers provides 'the rich zone' (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Tejada, 1999). From the evidence of the observations and teachers' and students' feedback in this study, this 'rich zone' is not yet fully tapped, although some teachers are aware of its potential.

The hybrid multicultural setting as reflected in the classrooms in this study offers a plethora of opportunities for teachers and students to construct a place for shared knowledge, including discursive reference to their own home experiences, so providing a space for collaborative work. From the classroom observations, the experiences students brought to the lessons were channelled when they had an opportunity to use materials depicting local scenarios, more favoured by the students than the teachers. Although the use of selected Malaysian authored text was a 'one off' experience for teachers and students, nonetheless, such texts could be used again and teachers are the key players in the longer term success of this initiative, i.e. motivating students to keep the communication and interaction going so that this shared knowledge can be expanded to make this study of literature the basis of a shared Malaysian identity.

From classroom observations and interviews conducted in this study, some students' found that they were likely to be more 'connected' in groups of friends from similar ethnicity in their classroom decision making. Teachers on the other hand, were seen exerting their cognitive understandings which seemed to best serve their teaching objectives for that particular lesson.

The findings, however, suggest that although there is a clear aim on the part of the teacher for the students to achieve the intended learning objectives in group discussions by making meaning through collaboration, it does not always work out as planned. Some teachers are more likely to perceive that group work collaboration at times inhibits knowledge construction since it takes more time for students to collaborate than to undertake individual work. Therefore, it was not surprising that some teachers in this study were sceptical and excluded group work from their lessons.

What can be concluded from the similarities and differences of perceptions between teachers and students mentioned above is that their insights into teaching and learning are inextricably related and contribute to different overarching ideas about the teaching and learning process. By giving a greater degree of 'voice' to the students and more autonomy to the teachers, as well as students, in their classroom decision making, schooling would arguably provide the best terrain for the cultivation of any new, positive inter-ethnic relations in a multi-ethnic country such as Malaysia.

5.2 Choice of language and structures used

Students' and teachers' language structure and use in their interactions and communication can produce a construction of shared knowledge, thus facilitating the development of the pathway to shared Malaysian identity. The persistent use of Malaysian English (Manglish) not only between the students but also between the teacher and students' interactions raised an overriding question in the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian classrooms; does the use of Manglish provide more learning opportunities for students? Or will it be an impediment to the development of more robust and rigorous methods for English language learning? There are differing ideas concerning this issue. On the one hand, the use of Manglish could be seen as undermining the state decision to allocate more English language-learning hours, which has been one of the key items on the Malaysian education agenda since the decision was taken to teach and learn science and mathematics through the medium of Bahasa Malaysia, starting in 2012. The use of 'globally accepted' English or International English (Seidlhofer, 2003) is very much advocated in the Malaysian setting as Manglish has generally been associated with inaccuracy and has been regarded as non-standard and colloquial, thus inhibiting communication with the wider English-speaking community (i.e. UK, USA, Australia and others). However, while it is an acceptable form of spoken discourse in some contexts, it is rarely used in written form. On the other hand, researchers have found that language learning can be made more meaningful if students are given the opportunity to link their home experience and knowledge to their classroom enterprises (actions and activities) (Paiva, 2000).

Many English language experts in Malaysia emphasise the need to focus not on how the language is spoken, but upon the accuracy with which the language is used including grammatically correct sentence construction; at the same time, however, colloquialism in communication is not rejected, as long as the message intended is understood. This is acknowledged by researchers who conducted several studies in the Malaysian context (Baskaran, 1994; Gaudart, 2000; Lee, 1998; Pillai, 2006; Pillai&Fauziah, 2006). From the perspective of this study, 'knowledge of the different sub-varieties' of languages, mention above is relevant for teachers and students so that they can explore their experience of the language thereby reinforcing the notion of the Third Space.

5.3 Participation in collaborative hybrid engagement in a community of practice (CoP)

Collaborative learning, as explained by Dillenbourg (1999), is defined in different ways by different scholars, but it can be loosely defined as '*a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together*' (ibid:1) (original emphasis). Thus, collaborative engagement in this study is used to characterise students' activities for task completion in order to identify favourable or unfavourable practices that would support the construction of collective identity amongst the students and teachers. In the CoP, people in a society/community share similar concerns, in this case, the construction of an embodied society for a more politically and economically stable country. The findings of this investigation reveal that the idea of CoP can be applied to the classroom context in that students interact regularly with different sets of people in the school community, whether intentionally or otherwise. Students and teachers do not necessarily work together every day but occasionally, as and when they find the necessity to share experience and knowledge relating to a shared value. This can be exemplified in the group work the students carry out in the classroom. Whilst working on tasks, they implicitly build on understanding/misunderstanding of working as a group and try to overcome problems and conflicts.

The main concern is that a CoP needs to be nurtured by teachers and by the students themselves in order to support the construction of a shared Malaysian identity. In the findings on students' preference for working in groups, I concluded that teachers found that students were able to interact with each other regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, some students preferred to be in a group with members of similar ethnicity (if they were given the choice). Therefore, some students would seize every opportunity to work with peers from a similar ethnic background. In order for a CoP to be successful and effective, teachers would have to play a major role in developing students' interest in working with peers from different backgrounds, and, most importantly, teachers need to set a good example themselves by working very closely with teachers from other ethnic backgrounds. One teacher (SH) suggested that it is essential to understand the cultures of people in one's own country before moving on to understand the cultures of the world. With a multicultural and multi ethnic community like Malaysia, understanding people from different cultural backgrounds is likely to take time, effort and a lot of motivation as some may believe that 'understanding others' may not bring any 'personal' benefit to them. Therefore, generating and using materials, such as those related to the experiences of home, community and the world, would help students to be more willing to collaborate and engage with students from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds as they could share values and aspirations in a community of practice.

6.0 Conclusion and Implications

Group dynamics are important in order for the students to be able to engage in a comfortable and healthy process of meaning-making. Students in this study attempted to negotiate between their peers and also with their teachers in making decisions about who they wanted to work with during the learning process. This was because they needed peers with whom they were able to collaborate and, at the same time, with whom they could come to a decision about the assigned tasks. Specifically, some tasks involved discussion of 'sensitive' issues pertaining to stereotyping in the Malaysian community. The use of Malaysian short stories provides a Third Space in that students were able to use their home and community knowledge into the classroom context. This, I see as a catalyst for shared Malaysian identity. Messages embedded in a topic discussed, enables the students to appreciate 'others' around them. It is also a life skill and has an intrinsic value for students, that of learning to use language – any language as the medium for any subject – as their own tool, but best illustrated in the literature component of English language and through Malaysian short stories, the most appropriate 'homebase' for all Malaysian students in the multi-ethnic classroom. Literature could be the subject to evoke a sense of togetherness and appreciation of others and 'otherness' around them. The experiences in the literature classroom could help the students in their real life outside school and will prepare them to integrate themselves into the society.

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