

**Learning about learning:  
Literacy demands in 'Singapore's global university'**

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**Abstract**

This paper was borne out of a student's remark on the failure of his English classes to make him a good English language learner. From the point-of-view of teacher, course designer and coordinator of these courses, I would like to locate this remark in a range of institutional and ideological contexts which shape the student's learning. This attempt at explaining the student's 'failure' is not a simple one: it necessitates an understanding of an academic tertiary institution's discursive (re)packaging as a global university which has implications for the privileging of certain institutionalized literacy demands in English as an academic language which, in turn, impact on - and resist - the students' 'real' English language needs outside the classroom. This paper argues that the institutional, ideological and discursive closures to my student's English language learning, in the end, are also opportunities for change because the university is, borrowing the words of Soudien (2005) about education in general, "one space in which self-reflection is possible". The issue here is not to transform the university from the 'outside', but to (re)negotiate terms and policies from 'within' in order to locate spaces of intervention and resistance to transform the learning process.

**Introduction**

I'm not usually a huge fan of bumper stickers, even the ones I agree with, because of the way they shout out simplistic positions on complex issues. I still remember, though, when I saw the one that read "Standardized Testing Produces Standardized Students." I smiled and nodded my head a bit in agreement.

(Williams, 2005:152)

One early morning on an internal shuttle bus from my place on campus to my office, I sat beside one of my former students (Chern Xin, not his real name) who studied Basic English and English for Academic Purposes with me the year earlier. Fifteen minutes into our conversation, I suddenly realized that I was speaking to this young man - a brilliant music student from China - in English which I could almost completely understand. He stuttered a few times but there was no doubt about the fact that we both could now carry out a decent conversation which, ten months earlier, was not possible at all. I suddenly became excited and told him how amazed I was at his transformation as a 'good' conversationalist in English. Then, he told me the truth.

Chern Xin first mentioned that he had just arrived from a number of music competitions in Europe and abroad. He informed me that in one of these world competitions, he was awarded the grand prize for violin. He also stayed in a music camp in Las Vegas in the United States for a month which 'forced' him to speak in English to both Americans and other music scholars from all over the world. He said that he learned how to speak in English from these travels, and as a consequence, became a bit more confident with his English skills. "Actually", he declared with an impish smile, "I didn't learn from your classes at all".

My initial impulse was to defend my courses but, in the end, I had to agree with him. After all, I had myself been very critical of the way these courses were designed but, as I will explain later, a variety of individual, institutional and sociocultural factors have coalesced to generate the kinds of content and shape these courses would eventually have. In this paper, I would like to provide an answer to the question of why Chern Xin believed he did not learn from my classes at all. From the point-of-view of these courses, my student failed his English lessons. However, from his own point-of-view, it was these lessons that failed him. Whose view is correct, and is this question even a constructive one, able to provide enlightening answers?

This paper's attempt at explaining Chern Xin's 'failure' in his English classes (or how his classes failed him) is not a simple one: it necessitates an understanding of an academic tertiary institution's discursive (re)packaging as a global university, able to compete with the best in the world while extending its reach towards a much more diverse group of

international students not only from Southeast Asia, but also from Europe and other regions. It also requires us to examine institutionalized literacy demands in English as an academic language as they impact on - and resist - the students' 'real' English language needs outside the classroom. In the process of discussing these important issues, various instances of accommodation and change will also be explored.

The following discussion consists of four main sections. Section 1 contextualizes the music students' English language learning experience in Singapore. It argues that the university's discursive pitch towards a globalized identity poses many problems to the students' language learning. Section 2 pushes the argument forward through an understanding of the students' language learning problems as problems of *investment*, a term introduced by Peirce (1995) to refer to conditioned learning that is taking place in English language learning contexts. Through this concept, I will re-interpret the meaning of 'failure' and specifically argue that student performance inside and outside the language learning classroom is complex and cannot simply be reduced to the students' motivation problems.

Section 3 of this paper develops further the notion of investment, but this time, in the specific context of the process of reinscribing homogenizing ideologies and identities in the students and how such process helps strategize the teaching of English to these students. The students' learning is indeed conditioned but such reality from 'below' generates possibilities that help the students 'succeed' in their learning. Finally, Section 4 zeroes in on assessment as a core problem in the conditioning of the students' language learning experience. It will demonstrate how assessment practices are powerful because they can serve as instruments of control over the identity and ideology formation of students.

## **1. The context of learning: Understanding the issues**

### *Theoretical considerations*

The music students in question belong to the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YSTCM) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) which calls itself *Singapore's global university* and whose main vision as it appears in its website is "to be a globally-

oriented university, in the distinguished league of the leading public universities in the world". These music students, in other words, first of all are students of a university whose "global standing" is worth celebrating (Shih, 2006). This has been achieved with a fierce competitive global outlook as articulated below by the president of the university:

In a competitive, fast changing world, we must run. We must run just to survive. We must run twice as fast in order to have a shot at global excellence (Shih, 2006, n.p.).

It is important to situate the music students within this discursive construction of the university as a global institution able to compete ably with the best of the world in order to understand the literacy requirements that they are expected to perform. As will be explained below, for example, while the interconnection between globalization and effective communication in English is a given in this globalist discourse, the need for students to be socialized into the institutionalized writing and reading practices of the university is one of the prerequisites for being a global university that is proud of its internationally diverse but academically homogeneous (read: academically outstanding student population). Similarly, it is also important to note that this institutional socialization is macrosocially mediated by ideologies of identity and literacy in Singapore where English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are official languages but where Standard English "comes across as linked to mainstream identities and academic accomplishments when compared with other languages" (Stroud & Wee, 2007: 43).

In general, these students take two English language courses: Basic English (BE) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). A student needs to pass the BE course before being allowed to take the EAP course. A BE course requires students to write a paragraph and two essays, with heavy emphases on grammatical accuracy and basic organizational structures. An EAP course requires students to write at least two 'academic' essays, usually argumentative and expository, keeping in mind the various patterns of organization representative of academic writing(s).

A key difference between the two is in the area of assessment: as will be further explained below, BE is a university-wide course which uses the same syllabus across

faculties and with all students taking the same final paper. The EAP course, on the other hand, is a faculty-based module which means that, while the language, reading and writing skills are generally uniform across the faculties, the delivery of content, including the shape and organization of the course, is discipline-specific. In other words, while the final paper draws on essentially the same set of skills, the different EAP courses can pitch language complexity at a level deemed appropriate for specific groups of students. There are very crucial implications here: first, music students need to be pushed 'up' to at least the minimum university level of English language proficiency (e.g., able to write a generally comprehensible essay despite the possibility of grammatical problems everywhere) before they are allowed to take the EAP course.

In short, borrowing from Williams' (2005) quote above, the music students need to be standardized - *to be like everyone else in the university* - before their specific communication needs are adequately addressed. It is this process of standardizing the students that we are concerned with here because it tells us something about Chern Xin's context of *learning* which we treat in this paper as a "form of semiotic mediation" which involves, among other things, "the construction of a learner persona" (Stroud & Wee, 2007, p. 50). What is perhaps at stake here is not merely the emergence of new literacies (although from the perspective of the students, these are 'new'), but a broader, more inclusive configuration of literacy practices that will accommodate the changing sociolinguistic profile of the university in response to the challenges of globalization. The power of assessment is very crucial here because it is through this that standardization is carried out through "assimilative" practices (Shohamy, 2004:72).

#### *Understanding the institutional context*

When I was assigned the job of coordinator of English language courses at YSTCM two years ago, I was confronted with two immediate problems: first, the students were not only struggling in their English classes but were, in fact, failing them; and second, a good number of them could not even be made to take the BE course because their English language proficiency needed further improvement before they could take it. My view of these problems was made more evident by the fact that simultaneously, I was assigned to coordinate the BE course which, as earlier mentioned, is offered across most faculties. While this is a basic course in English, however, it must be noted that its shape

and content have been borne out of the assumption that the university's students are generally learners of English as a second language with prior long exposure to the teaching and learning of such language, and that their needs in the university are oriented towards writing (and, to some extent, reading) as an academic enterprise. The course, therefore, is essentially a sort of introduction to academic writing which already requires of students a certain amount of English language proficiency, including vocabulary knowledge.

The music students, however, are part of a relatively new phenomenon of international students with excellent, even brilliant, credentials (academic or artistic) but whose English language learning experience challenges (or has challenged) the university's core assumptions of what it means to study English in an academic tertiary institution, coupled with Singapore's general preoccupation with *Good English* as one way to project a globalized, cosmopolitan society and encourage more capital in all its forms to continue pouring into the country (Rubdy, 2001; Chng, 2003).

In a sense, this new phenomenon of a huge number of foreign students coming to the university to study creates a healthy paradox: on the one hand, it demonstrates the university's globalizing vision which is an imperative if it wants to compete with the best of the world; on the other hand, it is now faced with the prospect of confronting the changing sociolinguistic profile of the university. Therefore, when I took over as coordinator of both the university's BE course and the conservatory's English language courses, I was given a rare and privileged view of the intermeshing of academic literacy demands imposed upon the students: they were English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in both the *broad* context of learning English as a second language (ESL) in Singapore and the *specific* context of ESL academic writing in the university.

In other words, the students' English language learning experience in the university would occur within multilayered social and institutional demands where they were expected to write and read in academic English but whose 'real' needs radically deviated from these demands because their context of everyday academic struggles necessitated a great deal of speaking and listening skills. This does not mean that they did not need to write and read in academic English; they were also struggling with their content courses. But the students - who would at least share with their music professors a

certain degree of both conceptual and practical experiences in music and music education - would struggle more in their English language courses. They almost had nothing in common with their English teachers, except for the desire to pass the courses. Both the teachers and the students were working towards passing the final papers and forever “leave English at the back of my back”, as one of my students once remarked, so they could play their music “without it”.

## **2. Investment in language learning: Re-interpreting failure**

### *Investment vs. motivation in English language learning*

This need for music students to be *like everyone else* in a sociopolitical and institutional/academic context where their EFL learning experience is not the norm embeds what Peirce (1995) refers to as the students' *investment* in language learning. The following is Peirce's early articulation of this concept:

I take the position that if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital (17).

Do students want to invest in English language learning in their courses in the university? In the sense that they are doing so for instrumental or pragmatic reasons (c.f. Gardner & Lambert, 1972), certainly yes, for the simple reason that they need to pass the courses in order to keep their full scholarships that sustain them in their years as music students in the university. In the sense that they see their English classes as being able to help them in their English-dominant content courses such as Music Theory, the answer is also yes. Mainly because of YSTCM's desire to produce an English proficient group of musicians, the students' renewal of scholarships is also tied with their being able to pass their English language courses at a certain period of time. In a sense, these factors should be enough reason for these students to be motivated learners of English.

However, as Peirce clearly argues, investment is different from motivation in language

learning. Motivation is largely an individual creation, “a property of the language learner - a fixed personality trait” (17), a dominant conceptualization in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory based on some principles in social psychology. Investment, on the other hand, refers to the “socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton & Toohey, 2001:312). In the case of the music students, this relationship is to a context which demands from them new(er) identities of learning because they are not the original and/or dominant objects of change. Their attitudes towards English or their motivation in learning it does not provide an adequate picture of learning success or failure. Rather, it is their social and institutional location as EFL learners which defines the way they should relate and respond to English language learning. In other words, in order to be ‘good’ language learners who can pass their English courses or even receive satisfactory final grades in them, the music students must invest in their own learning *more* than everyone else in the university. It seems, in fact, that this is an investment that is not made through individual choice; it is a socially-conditioned investment in English language learning.

#### *Conditions of English language learning*

What are these conditions that define the kind of investment that these students need for their learning of English? Aside from the mismatch of literacy demands and ‘real’ needs, the students are institutionally and socially positioned to invest in English in specific ways. To use a well-known economic concept, an important conditioning refers to *opportunity cost* in English language learning. Hirsh (2006) explains this concept as “the fact that we forgo some benefits whenever we engage in one activity rather than another” (80), then he appropriates it in his discussion of issues in the learning of reading and writing in American schools:

If we read the same story to a child, we need to ask, how great are the benefits that the child will accrue by listening compared to the benefits if we had used the valuable time in more productive activities, such as reading other stories on the same topic? (80).

In the case of the music students, the notion of opportunity cost raises very crucial



issues. While in Hirsch's context opportunity cost speaks of the possibly most effective and/or productive way(s) of, say, teaching reading comprehension, for the music students the concept is in the end not about effectiveness or productivity: what is lost if they attend a particular English lesson, no matter how useful it is? The issue is not whether or not they pick up something valuable from the lesson, they improve their reading skills, or learn about good thesis statements, thus making them closer to passing the course. Rather, the issue is what they lose if they choose to attend their English classes.

An important sub-culture among the students, for example, is their measure of a productive day: their being able to practice their musical instruments for at least six hours a day. These very long hours of individual practice are tied with their ability to gain accuracy in their music. But in Singapore, many students have noted a couple of times in my classes, being able to practice their instruments for six hours is a luxury. Not only do they need to book their individual practice rooms, but they also have academic duties to grapple with everyday. This is unusual, they say, because back in China music students are not subjected to the kind of rigorous academic work which they are in the university in Singapore. The sociocultural context of their learning can be summed up as follows (Zhu, 2006):

[T]he children spending hours after hours practicing their musical instruments gradually fall behind the others in terms of common knowledge and English as well. When they are ready to go to school, they mostly go to music schools affiliated to conservatories of music, where they will receive a special education in a special way. They continue to spend most of their time and effort on music, neglecting the other subjects, and most of the time they receive a one-to-one coaching (n.p.).

What we are seeing here, in other words, are shifting definitions of what it means to be a music student or scholar, and such instances of reconceptualization of who they are ironically gives them the opportunity to wrestle with their own identities as music students in Singapore. From session to session, the students are faced with a dilemma of not only choosing what to do, but of choosing who they are: music students (in the way they learned to understand it) or English language learners (in the way the

university defines it)?

The consequence of 'resistance' against such institutional academic demands is always clear to them: the possibility of taking their English classes all over again and, worse, losing their scholarship. But it seems that most of them in their daily struggles as music students are willing to play dangerously with this possibility. It is not uncommon for them, for example, to ask permission to leave the class in the middle of a graded essay writing assignment to attend a 'master class' - that is, to listen to and watch a prominent world-renown musician in their field (a cellist, for example) lecture and play the instrument in front of them. Indeed, in this particular instance, the students choose to be music students rather than English language learners; they have been made to choose who they think they are. It is for this reason that asking whether or not they made the right decision in this case is unhelpful, if not counterproductive.

Thus, when the students invest in their own learning of English, they do so against the backdrop of all these institutional and social constraints. The students' motivation level in this sense cannot well capture the complexity of their success or failure in learning English (see Thanasoulas, 2002; Hussin et. al, 2001); it cannot explain, for example, why those who are fairly serious and motivated to pass their English courses still fail them in the end and take these courses two or three more times. More than motivation, it is the amount of investment in English language learning that can adequately and fairly explain why some people are more successful language learners than others. Therefore, the following statement of McKay and Wong (1996) in relation to their study of investment in English language learning among four Mandarin-speaking adolescent students in the United States is also true in our case:

The learners' historically specific needs, desires, and negotiations are not simply distractions from the proper task of language learning or accidental deviations from a "pure" or "ideal" language learning situation. Rather, they must be regarded as constituting the very fabric of students' lives and as determining their investment in learning the target language (603).

### **3. The politics of change: Negotiating structures and discourses**

*Individual needs or institutional demands?*

But what do the students need and why is it a challenge to address them? Despite the limits of needs analysis as a way to address the specific communicative requirements of the students, there was no doubt in my mind that this “principal method for determining what to include in ESP/EAP curricula, providing descriptions of academic skills and genres NNS [non-native speakers of English] students may encounter in future courses or that they will encounter in particular courses” (Benesch, 1999), was the first step towards redesigning the English courses of the music students. Certainly, Benesch (1999) is right in her claim that needs analysis simply “describes what is expected of students, not what might happen if their wishes were elicited and acted on” (314), thus assuming “that students will fulfill, not question, target situation requirements” (315). But I could not even go beyond such a descriptive approach and envisage my role as course administrator and designer as being able to “transform existing conditions to encourage student engagement” (Benesch, 1999: 315). In fact, I could not even make needs analysis work for the students; I was myself busy engaging in some sort of politics of accommodation and transformation because the institutional conditions within which I worked essentially made it difficult for the specific needs of the music students to be adequately addressed.

For one, as mentioned earlier, the first thing to be done is to push the students ‘up’ to the level of English language proficiency that is deemed desirable from the point-of-view of the university. This is what Basic English is meant to do. It is only when students pass this course that they can move on to take the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course which is essentially faculty-based (even if the skills to be tested are similar across faculties), and thus more open to creative ways of addressing the students’ academic needs. But because BE is university-wide with a standardized final paper for all students taking the course, the music students’ specific needs cannot be adequately addressed. As the writer of the final paper, despite mixed emotions I am understandably drawn towards assessing the standard skills of the course which all tutors in all faculties involved are expected to teach. In this very special context of academic literacy teaching and learning, needs analysis as a way to identify “institutional requirements and expectations” ( 325) is secondary to the overriding need to reorient the students’

academic lives towards the standardized lives of *everyone else* in the university.

Such a homogenizing educational practice is, of course, not unique to our case alone: the impact of globalization on education in general, and higher institutions in particular, has been viewed as simultaneously homogenizing and heterogenizing within a largely 'globalization-English nexus' (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005; see also Soudien, 2005:153). But my institutional/political location as a course administrator and designer is an especially interesting one: I am myself administered and designed by my own work in the university of which I am fully aware and despite the fact that the power to assess my students in a way that recognizes their strengths and weaknesses is theoretically within my reach. The challenge, however, is: this is a university-wide course; I must write my tests for *everyone*. The music students' identities as English language learners must be subsumed within the homogenizing embodied practices of *everyone*.

*The embodied discourse of choice as dominant identity*

The 'easiest' way out, of course, is to propose (which has been done a few times) a special course for music students in lieu of the BE course that they take along with students from other faculties. This seems to be the best way to recognize the music students' different literacy requirements without losing sight of the university's globalist ideals. The university's stance towards diversity, in fact, is clearly affirming and celebratory, a positionality that is perhaps understandable and predictable in the light of Singapore's well-known openness towards multicultural and multiracial ideals (Chua, 1998). But it seems that what is stake here is the politics of identity and meaning or, as earlier mentioned, the politics of what it means to be a music student in one of the world's best universities where market-driven literacy demands (Atkinson, 2002) and extremely high academic/market standards (Luke, 2005) saturate the university's educational policies and practices. A special course in English specifically catered to the needs of the music students may not necessarily be a bad idea, but it may be deemed problematic if this course pulls the students away from the standardized structures of learning in the university and officializes their difference *from* everyone else. The challenge for me therefore as a course administrator and designer is to make a special case out these students without necessarily making them special.

Let us see how this seeming contradiction is resolved by an officialized institutional discourse of choice. In his *State of the University Address 2006*, the President of the university (Shih, 2006) uses the case of a music student who was initially admitted into the university as a chemistry major as one example of how the university, in its march towards greatness, transforms people into creative talents because it allows them to make their own choices.

I started off by talking about how a great university transforms people. Daniel Aw came to us, matriculating in the Chemistry Department. After one year, he switched to music. In three years, he became the first to graduate from Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music – and with a first class honors. He's now off to Bern, Switzerland to pursue graduate studies. I would now like to share with you some of Daniel's music-making.

Daniel's life has been transformed because of the opportunity to choose. The transformation doesn't just stop with him. Each time he plays his bassoon, we are touched by the music.

We are running twice as hard, and we run for many reasons. For me, it's towards this kind of transformation - where people reach beyond themselves, to explore, discover and contribute.

In a sense, Aw's choice was a special one - from science to arts - but it has been appropriated within the context of the university's emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship through cultures of creativity. Against the backdrop of a corporatized, internationalized and globalized university, Aw has become an exemplar of the university's ideals of individual freedom and greatness. The 'specialness' of his choice has been made special but this has made him an ideal student of the university who has become *like everyone else* by choosing to be someone he wanted to be - a music student. This officialized discourse of choice does not valorize the music student, and nor does it privilege music and the arts over the natural and engineering sciences. Rather, it authenticates the university student's identity as one that embodies choice and freedom.

The point to note here is this: the music students are first and foremost students of the university. To take them out of the officialized structures of learning where choice and freedom, among other things, are turned into a homogenizing ethos, is to make them officially different. They *are* different, of course, like everyone else in the university, but this is not the problem since the university prides itself in celebrating diversity as part of its philosophy of excellence. But this deeply semiotically embedded identity formation in the university is crucial in understanding how students' learning is structured, especially in the context of negotiating (for) change.

### *Strategizing learning*

If not a special, separate course for the music students then, what are possible ways to deal with their unique presence in the university? One way is to propose a two-year English programme for the students in order to prepare them for their regular English language courses. The administration of the music conservatory, however, is not keen on this proposal, not only because of budgetary constraints but because this would require the students to stay in the university for two extra years. Here again, we have another potentially thorny situation: it is an ideal proposal from the point-of-view of language teaching, but it is understandably not a feasible one from the point-of-view of a music programme. As far as the latter is concerned, the need for students to stay in the university longer *because* of English, and not music, is not an ideal proposition. We can surmise that this is perhaps unproblematic as far as the university is concerned - adding more years before they are officialized into the discourses and structures of academic life - but we see here how a particular faculty resists this possibility because it does not fit into its own professional/institutional framework of what it means to be a music student. Whereas earlier we have noted how particular students resist redefinition on an individual level, here we also see similar resistance on an institutional level. This explains why another way of possibly addressing the music students' situation - use English language proficiency as one of the criteria in admitting music students into the university - is not deemed viable. Again, other than a simple English test which determines the students' level of proficiency and which is administered to them as applicants, the conservatory is not really - or, perhaps will never be - ready to redefine musical aptitude with English language proficiency as one of its crucial dimensions.

For more than two years, however, a few strategies and proposals have been acceptable to all parties because these do not go against the ethos and principles of both the university and the faculty. These are the strategies which produced students like Chern Xin who passed the required courses but, as we have seen above, think that these courses have failed them. The first is a one-semester English course before the normal English courses. Here the special course is incorporated into the students' regular music programme. The students do not need to stay longer in the university, although there is a little bit more work required in the first semester. In its trial run, seven students were asked to attend the course; all of them moved into their two regular English courses in the next two semesters and passed them in their first attempts. This is, of course, not an ideal programme, but at least this has been successful in familiarizing students with (the institutionalized) practices of learning in the English classroom in the university.

The second strategy is a six-week intensive English programme just before the students start their first semester in the university. Again, this is not an ideal proposal: but with daily contact with them, we have been able to introduce them to relevant concepts in writing which they would need to know in their regular English classes. Moreover, they would be initiated into important essay topics the content of which could prove difficult for the students because of unfamiliarity with the vocabulary and core issues. In a sense, this intensive programme is structured along the lines of the required work in the Basic English course. Initially, without this support programme, the students had trouble reading and writing essays on cross-cultural communication, globalization and ethical issues in science. With similar content but less linguistic complexity in reading and writing texts, the students have been able to respond to essay prompts more adequately even if, of course, the language part is admittedly a tough area to work or improve on.

The third strategy is to train a small pool of dynamic English teachers who are assigned to teach these students (Tupas et al., 2006). They are not only sensitized into the challenges of teaching this group of English language learners; they are also encouraged to appropriate writing and reading concepts within the students' realm of musical experience. Examples are notions of composition, rhythm, pitch, and prosody to teach essay writing. They are also encouraged to watch the students' performances where the latter are sometimes accorded a standing ovation. Similarly, the teachers are

asked to encourage the students to use their musical instruments to articulate important concepts in writing, such as patterns of organization and patterns of paragraph development. Here, the students explain comparison and contrast through similar and different genres of music and composition by playing the piano, process through a step-by-step demonstration of how to play the oboe, and so on. The underlying principles behind these do not follow the usual practices of using music in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms where grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are the target contexts of learning (Aloha, 2005; Lems, 2001). Nor are they used with scientifically-proven research on interrelations between language and music in mind (Maess & Koelsch, 2001) in terms of syntax and their place in the brain, thus the 'natural' affinity of the use of music with the teaching of language. In our specific context, the appropriation of musical concepts and instruments in the teaching of English is essentially grounded in 'real' need: the need to teach writing and reading through a conceptual approach where students are expected to understand broad notions such as essay organization, paragraph development and coherence in order to generate comprehensible ideas.

This third strategy is important because it demonstrates a pedagogical reality that is usually taken for granted: that effective language teaching practices and methods *should* emerge from 'below' such as actual classroom contexts where the specific, sometimes contradictory, needs of both teachers and learners are negotiated. Many scholars have argued that dominant methods and approaches in language teaching have been modelled and packaged after the interests of English-dominant developed countries in the West (the US and UK especially), and that these methods and approaches have been uncritically adopted, wholesale, in places where English is taught as a second or foreign language (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1991). In our context, a conceptual approach to the teaching of writing and reading simply means more focus on organization rather than language, even if language is extremely limited. Given the constraints of the said English courses, the primary objective is to pull the students 'up' in order for them to be like everyone else. While language is a problem, we have found that comprehensibility in longer stretches of discourse (e.g., paragraph, essay) is not an essentially linguistic problem but, more importantly, a conceptual problem. That is, the students need to develop their own sense of organization in order to be comprehensible. What we have found, to put it in another way, is this: if we look at



their sentences as the objects of our teaching, we cannot go very far. It is only when we ask our students to focus on their rhetorical organization that these sentences start to make sense. It seems that students' belief in language teaching that we cannot start with the paragraph or the essay without threshing out sentential problems needs re-evaluation. To understand the students' admittedly crude sentences, therefore, we need to see the 'logic' of their organization and content *first* before we can make sense of their sentences and, thus, provide suggestions on how to re-write them for better clarity (for parallel issues related to grammar correction and focus on global structures of writing, see Truscott, 1996; Sheppard, 1992).

These strategies helped first-year music students in 2005 and 2006 to finish their English courses in shorter periods of time than the earlier batches. But here is a curious question: if these strategies produced very good results, why did Chern Xin (he belonged to the 2005 cohort) believe that he did not learn anything from the English classes? If he passed all the exams, why did he think his English classes failed him? I will answer these questions in the last section below, but this time incorporating the rest of the discussion in the earlier sections of this paper.

#### **4. The power of assessment: Structuring literacies and identities in the university**

##### *Chern Xin's failed success*

The strategies above were indeed successful ways to stream the students into the regular English courses. They were innovative ways to deal with the students' unique presence in the university without deconstructing and/or destabilizing the general frameworks of identification and learning expectations of both the university and the faculty of music. But Chern Xin's statement on his not having learned from his English classes poses a seemingly contradictory dilemma: how was it possible for him to 'successfully' pass his courses and yet believe that the courses were not 'successful'?

Here, what it means to be successful is an interesting dimension to explore in English language learning. Because the proposal to create a separate English programme for the music students did not come through and because another proposal to send the students to a two-year language programme likewise was not accepted, then the

alternative proposals (which were deemed more desirable because they did not threaten institutionalized notions of literacy and identity in the university), were designed in order to align the students' literacy development and identity formation along the lines of the officialized discourse on what it means to be a student in a global university. It is this aligning the students' lives with everyone else's in the university that was successful to a large extent; what was not successful was the foregrounding of the students' desired needs in the use of English and our own perceptions of what they need based on our almost daily contact with them. So what happened was Chern Xin successfully aligned himself with the desirable characteristics of an English language learner in the university, absorbing the literacy demands imposed upon him, but he also found the courses wanting in addressing what he felt were his own needs in English language learning.

In actual classroom practice, what happened was the lessons were oriented towards preparing students for assessment purposes. Let us be reminded that assessment in this sense falls clearly under the category of 'standardized testing', as opposed to 'instructor-made' or 'student-conducted' testing methods (Cheng et al., 2004), which means that the notion of "the teacher as agent in assessment practices" (Rea-Dickens, 2004:252) is not significant. According to McNamara (2001), there are indeed competing demands in the classroom which impact directly and indirectly on assessment practices. On the one hand, there are demands coming from language testing researchers who are concerned mainly with issues of construct validity. On the other hand, there are demands "made on classroom teachers by system-wide administrative needs for accountability and reporting" (340). But there is a third set of demands made by learners and teachers who are at most "at risk" (341) of being ignored in the assessment process, thus affirming the "widespread perception that the needs of teachers and learners are not currently well served by assessment practice and assessment research" (340).

Such articulation of this specific problem of assessment certainly cannot be ignored especially in the light of the case of Chern Xin and his fellow music students. Their investment in English language learning cannot be reduced simply to problems of motivation as earlier mentioned; rather, apart from what has been argued so far, the students' English language learning is oriented mainly towards institutional literacy demands which use assessment to make sure that these requirements are not lost on anyone in the university despite their differences. Although the view of assessment as a

gatekeeper of institutional and cultural values is no longer a surprising proposition to many of us, the case of Chern Xin highlights the power of assessment in identity formation: Chern Xin may not have learned from his English classes but without him knowing it, these classes have made him a desirable student of the university because of the way he has become like everyone else who have embodied literacies and identities needed for the university to be a truly global institution.

In other words, Chern Xin and the assessment practices that have 'made' him as an English language learner have been positioned at the centre of many competing socio-political and ideological battles within institutions and beyond where democratic and undemocratic practices saturate everyone's daily lives. In broad strokes, these are the main competing battles in society where assessment becomes clearly an instrument of power and control (Shohamy, 2001:387-388):

1. between the need of central agencies for control, and desire for individual freedom
2. between the urge of groups for a common unifying knowledge, and open and creative knowledge
3. between a monolingual 'one language for all' policy, and multilingual tolerance
4. between the public need for symbolic devices of social order, and the need of individuals and groups for personal expression and freedom
5. between increased control in growing technological societies, and fluid and relative knowledge
6. between resentment of control by centralized agencies, and the need for control in order to maintain status and social order
7. between individual and group expression and freedom, and practical concerns and ideological forces.

## **Conclusion**

What then have we learned about learning, especially English language learning in an institutional context in Singapore?

First, that learning is conditioned and this conditioning is ideological, social and political in nature;

Second, that learning English in an institutional context is a kind of socialization into identity formation;

Third, that learning requires (social) investment, not just motivation;

Fourth, that learning is a story of competing demands from all stakeholders of education;

And fifth, that learning is largely defined by assessment practices, especially standardized testing.

Chern Xin's English language learning experience in the university has exposed a network of structuring conditions which have made his learning English problematic. Conditioned learning, however, is never complete as evidenced above, for example, by the students' principled decisions to skip English classes in order to attend their master classes, or the teachers' conceptual approach to the teaching of writing in order to skirt the demand for language correctness. Of course, these are not cause for uncritical celebration of resistance or agency since these practices are to some extent also ways to orient learning towards desirable institutionalized practices, discourses and identities. No matter how we look at Chern Xin's academic life, his English language experience in the university was generated by forces larger than himself and, therefore, limited his individual freedom in the university. However, what is strikingly positive about this is the very fact that the limits of his individuality have actually opened up spaces of questioning and probing which can lead to transformations in the structures of learning in the university. Similarly, such limits which have hugely influenced the shape and content of the regular English classes have *actually* created breakthroughs in our negotiations for more appropriate English language programmes even if their ultimate objective is to align the students with university-wide curricula.

For example, this school year 2007-2008, a one-year intensive English course that addresses the individual and institutional demands of literacy upon the students has been approved by YSTCM mainly on the grounds that our work with the students for the past two years or so has been very satisfactory. Without making Chern Xin and his cohort 'successful' in their English language classes, this foundation English course would not have been approved, especially given the fact that this requires a huge amount of money. Likewise, our proactive and open-minded attitudes towards this learning conundrum among the music students, for example through the convening of a panel discussion of teachers who have taught these students (Tupas et al., 2006), have provided a venue to articulate the complex learning experience of the Chinese music students and, consequently, encouraged more teachers to volunteer to teach the music students, a direct contrast to past years' experience of people's dismissive and/or anxious attitudes towards teaching music students. The most important breakthrough is our recent meeting with the music faculty's administration which suggested that we liaise with particular staff to collaborate on the materials and structure of both the students' English classes *and* content courses.

We can therefore look at institutional, ideological and discursive closures to Chern Xin's English language learning in the university as opportunities for change because, no matter how we conceive of the university as an institutional infrastructure that hopes to flatten out identities through its own dominant ideologies of globalism and multiculturalism, it is precisely because of such dominance that the university has become, borrowing the words of Soudien (2005) about education in general, "one space in which self-reflection is possible" (p. 145). The issue here is not to transform the university from the 'outside', but to (re)negotiate terms and policies from 'within' in order to locate spaces of intervention and resistance to democratize the learning process. Many scholars in different fields and different contexts have referred to these spaces in different ways: *critical moments* (Pennycook, 2004), *creative practice* (Williams, 1997), or *everyday forms of resistance* (Scott, 1985). From the point-of-view of a course coordinator, course designer and teacher rolled into one, we can simply call them little spaces of hope for our students.

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