Many Languages, Whither Literacy? Understanding the Ontology of Reading in Linguistically-diverse Contexts

SU LI CHONG

Department of Management and Humanities
Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Malaysia
chong_suli@utp.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The reading experience of those who are literate in more than one language is highly complex. This makes the reading experience a phenomenon that is not easily understood. Yet, in Malaysia's education policy, reading goals are subsumed under language learning goals. Such implicit ways of assuming that literacy occurs through language learning not only overlooks any impact language learning may have on literacy practice but also undermines the fact that learning to read in a language is ontologically different from reading through all or any language. This paper discusses a part of an in-depth qualitative study which scrutinized the reading experiences of eight multiliterate Malaysian undergraduates studying in a British university in order to understand the difference between being literate in many languages and choosing to read through any one language. The contrast between multilingual Malaysia and monolingual England formed an important backdrop. In this study, the phenomenological interview and diary-writing were used as research methods to capture the participants' past reading experience as Malaysian school students and as British university undergraduates. Phenomenographic analysis and discourse analysis were used to analyse the data. Findings from this study suggest that multilingual readers experience "language-ness" because of the specificities of multiple language learning. The phenomenon of language-ness then go on to influence the habituation and sustenance of reading choice across different languages. This paper suggests that as linguistically-diverse countries forge ahead to maintain its citizens' linguistic abilities, they must not forget that linguistic capital alone cannot shape a nation. Semiotic capital which relates to meaning-making is also critical in shaping an informed nation. This study has important implications towards contemporary discourse about Literacies, language and the reading experience.

Keywords: *multiliteracy; reading; language-ness; meaning-making; policy*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary research on reading, researchers argue that reading practices are not straightforward not least because of the complexities of how reading occurs when embodied in the reader as well as how sociocultural factors act upon the reader and reading experience (Chong 2016, Cliff Hodges 2016, Wyse, Andrews & Hoffman 2010). For those who are able to read and write across different language systems, the complexities are magnified. Yet, although more than half of the world's literate population is able to read in more than two languages, important mainstream research in literacy seemed initially, to be premised on the thinking that reading is largely a monoliterate endeavour. This resulted in monoliteracy being understood to be the process of an individual's ability to decode a singular usually alphabetic writing system (Chall 1983, Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin 1990). More recently however, with the rise of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) in countries outside Inner Circle nations (Kachru 1998), the idea of the use of multiple languages in the act of reading (and writing) has been more vastly explored. Bi-, tri- and multiliterates are defined as those who negotiate in more than one writing system (Baynham 1988, Hornberger & Link 2012). Thus, the challenges of multiliterates in accommodating a variety of morphological awareness (Pasquarella, Chen, Lam, Luo & Ramirez 2011) and pronunciations across orthographic differences (Commissaire, Duncan & Casalis 2011, Vale 2011) for example, have made for important areas of research. Yet, because this form of multiliteracy research in reading is

situated within the larger movement of Multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis 2000, Gee 2008, Gogolin 2013) and Pluriliteracies (Koo 2006), such focus on grapheme phoneme correspondence (GPC) is unable to fully account for the reading experience of those who contend with a variety of not just syntactic but semiotic and sociocultural factors when faced with the prospect of reading in a range of languages (Freebody 2007). In reality, these complexities are formed by a comingling of factors that is an interplay of many languages vested with unequal levels of sociocultural and political power which then go on to influence the ways in which language and literacy are practiced and planned for. As such, this paper argues for a perspective that frames the discourses of language and literacy in this light.

THE LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEBATE

In the Malaysian context, language policies account for a major part of the country's education planning. Here, pedagogical efforts tend to be shaped by multifarious forces that are largely determined by stakeholders of the language learning process (Asmah Haji Omar 2016). In these kinds of situations, government policies are held responsible for ensuring that language pedagogies is workable and effective. Also, schools are determined by the way in which they are bound to the main ethnic groups in the country. Tied inextricably to these ethnic groups are the different languages that are culturally and economically valued by the community. Success is measured through a student's mastery of language skill sets i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking. Therefore, language as capital is constantly fought over, politicised and even sacrificed. In the almost 300-page whitepaper of Malaysia's Education Blueprint, an overall word count showed that the word 'language' appeared 364 times in stark contrast to the word 'literacy' which appeared 65 times and 'read/reading' which appeared only 36 times (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2012). The word count implies that language learning is given more attention than reading. In the Bourdieuan (1993) sense of power and investment, linguistic capital appears to be at the heart of Malaysia's education policy. By association, reading is necessarily subsumed under the overarching focus of language learning. Typically, reading materials and activities are seen in terms of language assessment and improvement (Puteh, Mohd Zin & Ismail 2016). As argued by Raslie and Keong (2017) "Malaysia's mainstream stance on literacy in education is still….(g)auged from a top-down perspective" and "is attributed to mechanical and linguistic knowledge" (p. 3). One advantage of such undivided focus on the pedagogy of language teaching is the shaping of a citizenry that is minimally biliterate. Yet, the mastery of many languages does not seem to shape avid readers. Although patchy, data surrounding this suggests that generally, Malaysians are not habitual readers who read for pleasure (Chong 2011, Kadir 2003, Mozihim 2010).

Contrasted with contexts that are largely monolingual, the focus on language learning in a country like England may seem less prominent while literacy issues and policy receive more attention. For example, extensive research work in the sub-fields of multiliteracies, new literacies and bilingual literacy appear to emerge from majority monolingually-bound countries like UK, US and Australia (Gee 2000, Hornberger 2003, Kalantzis, Cope, Chan & Dalley-Trim 2016). In these kinds of research work, ideas about literacy as meaning-making are discussed. These new narratives wrestle with reading on a broader front. New Literacy Studies, for example, have become important proponents of broadening the boundaries of mainstream literacy to equally include multimodal literacy (The New London Group 2000). Perhaps because of this broad approach, national literacy policies in many of these countries go beyond being alphabetic-centric to also include efforts at promoting digital literacy, spiritual literacy, emotional literacy and financial literacy. In this case, the focus is on what sociocultural theorists refer to as the social semiotic turn of meaning-making where

multimodality opens new possibilities for gaining expertise (Kress 2000, 2010). Thus, in this situation, value is placed on what I call, semiotic capital.

The contrast in the way multilingual and monolingual nations value linguistic and semiotic capital flags up important differences in terms of understanding how these differing policies and practice are seen through the experience of those who are beneficiaries of such systems. Through his perspective on language and literacy policies in Australia, Luke (2003) argues that issues of capital, power and history must be accounted for in dialogues on language pedagogy and literacy practice. In other words, critical perspectives must be brought in to understand how language is prized in different communities so that these policies can be justly placed. This then can lead to how local or minority groups who are often marginalized can be meaningfully understood and accommodated in matters of policy. Luke (2003, p. 4) goes on to warn language and literacy researchers who tend to isolate their studies that:

> We are now dealing with the social and demographic impacts of postcolonialism and economic globalisation, with culturally and linguistically diverse student bodies having become the norm in many educational jurisdictions. At the same time, the actual practices and demands of literacy are in historical transition…

Luke's (2003) emphatic call for language and literacy educators to take stock of how they must better understand the complexities of local cultures and ways of being in the world, is important for pushing open discussions that not only account for but celebrate indigenous knowledge. In the context of this paper, "Indigenous knowledge is not about aborigines as subjects but about man's knowledge from another perspective, at the fringe of, or aside of dominant knowledge systems" (Bajunid 2016). Therefore, this call revolves around the genuine intention of those of us who are in so-called, empowered positions to get to the heart of how our own community experiences particular forms of learning which go on to impact lives. Amongst other requirements, Bajunid (2016, p. 10) calls for examining "in-depth, the intimate details of successful classroom practice" as an example of how we can capitalise on local knowledge and experience. It is important to note that knowledge and experience that is indigenous to a community is valuable even and especially when it is located in mainstream contexts. This is because local community who are positioned in mainstream spaces are themselves not devoid of their own cultural, historical and personal struggles. Thus, departing from Luke's (2003) focus on minority groups and their struggle with language and literacy issues, this paper argues that even those who may not consider themselves marginalised should weigh in on this matter. In fact, multilingually-diverse nations that wrestle with positioning English as an important, commoditised language whilst protecting local or national languages have been responsible for imposing language policies affecting the lives and trajectories of their citizens. In trying to understand how these policies have affected the lives of those who bear the consequences, this paper argues that the voices of those who are multilingually literate must be heard. Using the fundamental notions of reader response theory (Rosenblatt 2005) by way of joining the recent increased effort to "put the reader at the centre of the reading experience" (Rothbauer, Skjerdingstad, McKechnie & Oterholm 2016, p. 1), this paper gives voice to the real reader and their reading experience. In so doing, it argues that language and literacy policy and practice in Malaysia warrants closer scrutiny because the heavy focus placed on language policy will inevitably affect the way in which multiliterate Malaysians relate to language and literacy.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper will explore the question of how multiliterate readers identify with the different languages they have learnt in school and how this influences their literacy experience and reading choice as undergraduates. These real readers' accounts of their reading experience will yield data to form the basis for theoretical argumentations which have been said to be insufficiently discussed (Fitzgerald 2003).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out in England, United Kingdom. It involved 8 Malaysian undergraduates who were pursuing their degrees in a British university. The study was designed to provide a close look at the lived experience of a group of Malaysian undergraduates who were able to read and write in least two languages and who were negotiating academic and non-academic reading in an environment differently contrasted to Malaysia. This contrast comes to light specifically in terms of the linguistic difference in both countries.

Malaysia is a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual country. Majority of Malaysians are ethnic Malays. Because of its migratory history, Malaysia is also made up of ethnically Chinese and Indian citizenry whose forebears were brought into the then Malaya by the British in the 18th century. Today, Malay language is considered the country's national language while English is the second language and Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent still regard Chinese and Tamil as their mother tongues, respectively. Multiple languages are taught in Malaysian schools as a matter of policy. Depending on the nature of the schools, academic reading materials are presented in Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English.
In contrast, England is a monolingual country in that it has a singular official language: English. This language is spoken by more than 98% of the citizenry. This means that some form of the English language, spoken or written, is used for day-to-day activities. English is also the most widely-spoken language across Europe (Special Eurobarometer 243 2006). Because of its prevalence, language policy in England is shaped by monolingually-informed perspectives. The medium of instruction in schools and universities is necessarily English. Thus, the British university which the Malaysians were studying in is a monolingual one with English as the medium of instruction. Academic reading materials are presented in English.
The way in which language matters are prioritised in Malaysia while literacy matters seem to be situated in the periphery of education stands in stark contrast with the way literacy matters are prioritised in England whilst language matters may struggle to gain due attention. This is important because the experience of learning language(s) and learning to read is differently situated. Yet, there tends to be an assumption that when languages are learnt, reading necessarily occurs.

METHODOLOGY, METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Because it was understood that the reading experience is unique to the individual reader, the study was underpinned by interpretivist epistemology with the phenomenological perspective to guide the research methodology (Giorgi 1985). Purposive sampling was used to select the participants of the study. The undergraduates in this study were selected because of their combined experience of having been educated in a multilingual context in Malaysia and a monolingual one in England. In total, eight undergraduates between the ages of 19 – 23

volunteered to be a part of the study. The undergraduates' identity was protected at all times. All names have been changed.

The methods used for this study were phenomenological interviews which were carried out at least three times, with each participant. The interviews ranged from approximately 1 hour to almost 3 hours for any one interview. In relation to this topic of reading and language, the first interview was dedicated to talk surrounding the participants' recollections of their language learning experience through primary and secondary school in Malaysia. Intertwined with the recollections of their general language learning experience across the four language skills (viz. reading, writing, speaking and listening) were the participants' specific recollections of their reading experience across the languages. In the second and third interviews, the talk revolved around their reading experience as undergraduates in a British university and the reading choices they made against a monolinguistic backdrop in England. The participants were also asked to keep a weekly diary which captured their reading experience across eight to eleven weeks. All interviews and diary entries were fully transcribed, coded, categorised and analysed.

Phenomenographic data analysis aims to describe, analyse and understand lived experiences (Marton 1981). Brew (2001) drew up several steps when carrying out phenomenographic analysis. They include separating out the different ways in which the phenomenon is experienced, mapping the structural relationships between the component parts and interpreting the referential meanings that emerge from the relationship mapping (Brew 2001, p. 274). In this study, the phenomenographic analytic method provided a macro perspective to understanding how the themes came together. When applied to this study, phenomenographic analysis was able to provide the analytical underpinning to explain the broadly different ways in which those who could read in two as opposed to those who could read in three languages experienced reading. Refer to Table 1 for the phenomenographic steps and its application into this study.

TABLE 1. Phenomenographic steps and its application into this study

Step no.	Phenomenographic analysis steps	Phenomenographic analysis applied to this study
1.	Separate out the different ways in which the phenomenon is experienced	Separate out (into sub-groups) the broadly different ways in which the eight participants experienced reading
2.	Map the structural relationships between the component parts	Map the structural relationships among members within the sub-groups in terms of how they experienced reading
3.	Identify and interpret the referential meanings that emerge from the relationship mapping	Interpret the structural relationship to provide a referential explanation for why the participants experience reading in a particular way

However, the macro perspective provided by phenomenography was insufficient as it could not interrogate the minutiae of the talk data. For that, discourse analysis was used in order to draw out a nuanced understanding of how these undergraduates experienced their reading experience across different languages.

FINDINGS

Within the scope of this paper, the terms bi-, tri- and mulitliterate refer to an individual's ability to read in two, three or multiple writing systems. Table 2 shows the participants' profile comprising their language learning backgrounds in their primary and secondary school in Malaysia as well as their reading choices as university undergraduates in England in terms of the language the materials were presented in.

TABLE 2. Language and literacy profile of participants

PARTICIPANT/ GENDER	LITERATE ABILITY	MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION		UNIVERSITY TERM TIME & VACATION TIME DIARY	
		Primary	Secondary	Academic reading materials	Non-academic reading materials
Jen (F)	Biliterate	Malay	Malay (& English for Mathematics and Science)	English	English
Nick (M)		Malay	Malay (& English for Mathematics and Science)	English	English
Fong (F)		Chinese	Malay (& English for Mathematics and Science)	English	English & Chinese
Khong (M)		Chinese	Malay (& English for Mathematics and Science)	English	English
Jon (M)	Triliterate	Chinese	Malay (& English for Mathematics and Science)	English	English
Jack (M)		Chinese	Malay	English	English
Yen (F)		Chinese	Malay (& English for Mathematics and Science)	English	English & Chinese
Zee (F)		Chinese	Malay (& English for Mathematics and Science)	English	English & Chinese

As the interview and diary data was analysed, three initial themes where formed. First to take shape was a theme that captured the participants' accounts of their general language learning. This theme was named *language learning experience*.

Second to take shape was the participants' talk about their literary learning experience. This refers to the Literature Component that is embedded within the language subjects (e.g. students are expected to learn English Literature in the English subject, Chinese Literature for Chinese, Malay literature for Malay). This second theme was named *English/Malay/Chinese literature*.

A third theme captured the participants' accounts of reading specifically through the different languages they were literate in, both in school and in university. Under this third theme, the participants' experience of reading within and especially outside the academic context was captured. This theme was called *reading in different languages*.   Through the use of phenomenographic analytical method, the three initial themes were interrogated so as to understand how the research participants were similar and different amongst themselves with regard to the three themes. Essentially, two groups emerged: the biliterates and triliterates. Across both groups, it was found that they shared the similar process of becoming skilful at reading across multiple languages and latterly, confronted the choice to practice mono or multiliteracy.

BECOMING MULTILITERATE

In the first part of the analysis, the participant group was divided into those who were biliterate and triliterate. There appeared to be a perceptible difference between how the bi- and triliterates talked about the distinctions. While not effortless, the two biliterate readers did not appear to remember insurmountable challenges in learning English and Malay. On the other hand, the other six who were triliterate talked about significant difficulties. On the whole, it appeared that unsurprisingly, wider linguistic access afforded wider access to experience literacy. In order to arrive at a nuanced understanding of being multilingual and being literate through multiple languages, it is important to scrutinise the participants' language learning experience as it impacts upon their literacy choices. In the following sections, two cases, a biliterate and triliterate reader respectively, will be presented.

Jen, was a first year Engineering undergraduate who was biliterate. English appeared to be her first language in the sense that she was most comfortable in it. Malay was the other

language in which she was literate. In the following excerpt, I will examine Jen's selected talk about what she remembered about composition writing in the Malay language subject while in secondary school.

> Researcher: Did you enjoy those times when let's say you were preparing for the *karangan*?
> Jen: Actually coming to think about it, I did because there was always a form of expressing what I thought. Despite, you know, your generic answers, like ***remaja*** or ***punca***, why ***remaja lari dari rumah***, self-pressure, family pressure, boyfriend, influence of the media, can still remember, all the [Researcher: ***faktor-faktor?***], yeah, ***faktor-faktor***, ***punca langkah***, your **standard and then throw in at least like two** *peribahasa* **every, every paragraph and you most likely score high**. So then after a while, I got bored using the same old *peribahasa* so then you, you just hungry, just look for more, look for more, and each time I can I can find an opportunity to use it or to write about an or about a new topic and you use new words and because you, inherently you use, surely you would have an opinion about something also. So it's just really nice that you get to write your opinion and let other people, just let the teacher **mark** what you think.

Despite English being her first language and speaking almost entirely in English across the interviews, Jen used the Malay term *karangan* to refer to Malay compositional reading and writing. Jen used this Malay referent at several points across the interviews. Picking up from Jen, I continued the conversation thread and similarly used the term *karangan*. Jen carried on talking about the compositional topics for the Malay language subject. Again, she switched to Malay and used words like *remaja* (adolescents), *punca* (causation), *remaja lari dari rumah* (adolescents who run away from home), *punca langkah* (causation steps) and *peribahasa* (proverbs) to talk about the topics and composition points. From predictable essay topics to stock proverbs, these terms stand for the overt content matter that made up much of Jen's language learning experience. Jen's specific language shift pointed not to any limitation in her English language vocabulary but rather, to how she remembered her Malay language learning experience. Interestingly in the midst of her description, I interjected and used the word *faktor-faktor* (factors). Jen followed on and also used the same term. Being a borrowed word, this Malay term differed only minimally from its English term by a single orthographic shift (with the 'k' replacing the 'c') as well as word repetition which, in Malay grammar, functions to denote plurality. Despite their close orthographic appearance, our use of the English word 'factor' would not have been the same as the Malay word *faktor-faktor*. This is because in this context, the Malay term *faktor-faktor* was tied to the compositional reading and writing strategies through which students learnt to be literate in Malay. As such, both my and Jen's choice of using the Malay word *faktor-faktor* over the English word 'factor' was important in suggesting that language is fundamentally experienced and even remembered through its specificity.

The second case is about Jon. He was a second year Engineering undergraduate. He is triliterate in Malay, English and Chinese. In more than one instance, Jon referred to his mother as being someone who ensured that he had a firm footing in the three languages he had had to learn. The following excerpt was drawn from his first interview.

> Researcher: What about the Harry Potter thing? Did you get drawn into that?
> Jon: Oh! I got forced by my mum to read the first two in Malay.
> Researcher: Tell me about that. Why were you forced by your mum to read in Malay?
> Jon: Cause my Malay was quite bad at that time and obviously I was suffering quite a lot in Malay school… she basically just bought it and say "I bought it, you read it."

While on the topic of non-academic reading, I asked if Jon had read the Harry Potter series. Assuming that he too may have been a fan, I continued and asked if he had been "drawn into" the phenomenon. In stark contrast, Jon responded that not only was he not a fan, he had been "forced" by his mother to read the books in Malay language. When asked why,

Jon explained how his mother had thought it would help him improve his proficiency in the Malay language. Very tellingly, when imitating his mother, Jon shifted his tone and changed his pitch to a significantly lower one so as to denote authority. From Jon's word choice (i.e."forced") to his deliberate tonal shift, it seemed to indicate that the decision to read the Harry Potter books was not his. Where for many the world over Rowling's books were much anticipated, anxiously awaited and a source of pleasure, it became for Jon a means to improve a language he was deemed to be struggling with. Therefore to Jon, those novels came across firstly as a functional and possibly less pleasurable language exercise and, secondly, through a language that Jon was weakest in. In this sense, the novels stood twice removed. This is an account of what could have been a pleasurable experience of reading that had been recast into reading from pressure on the back of what was deemed to be language deficiencies. It is important to note that Jon did not sustain the reading of later novels of this series beyond the first two translated versions. This tug-of-war is understood in terms of the different reading rates that a multiliterate individual necessarily faces.

The findings of Jen and Jon thus far suggest that for the multiliterate person, reading was very often firstly and necessarily subsumed under language learning. This is because reading materials which are conventionally read for pleasure were also found to be used for language learning and improvement. For multiple-language learners, externally-imposed pedagogical goals in the form of assessments, scoring, evaluation, judgement and competency-building become pronounced because they are the tangible markers of language mastery. This means that during this process, the language learner reads less for pleasure, but more for performance: usually for a teacher. This also means that their exclusive focus on building linguistic capital may influence the way they identify with the reading experience. Such an experience can cause language learners to retain habits of a language learner, to the exclusion of forming desirable habits of life-long readers.

CHOOSING MONO- OR MULTILINGUAL LITERACY

There appeared not to be a predictable pattern in the way biliterates chose multiliteracy from the way triliterates did. The similarities and differences in the way the eight participants described and represented their multiliteracy suggested that the way they chose to practise multiliteracy had less to do with multiple language accesses and more to do with how they identified with the languages especially in terms of their upbringing and social context. This tied back to how they had experienced their language learning and their overall transactions with reading across the different languages.

Jack was a final year Engineering undergraduate. He was a triliterate with high levels of proficiency in English, Chinese and Malay. Despite being able to read in three languages, his consistent choice of reading almost entirely in English across both academic and non-academic domains whilst in the university, marked him out to be a multilingually able individual who seemed to choose monoliteracy.

In the first interview, Jack talked about his choice of reading in English.

> Researcher: Right. So when it was books by choice, it was still in English in secondary (school)?
> Jack: Yes, yes.
> Researcher: **Why?**
> Jack: It's the language I'm most comfortable with. Especially in reading form. Yeah. Why? **It's such a (laughs) how do I answer that? It's just that I've read English books all my life. Why would I suddenly switch to a different language?**

In this excerpt, my questions were directed at how Jack came to making the choice to read in English within a context that appeared to forefront Malay and Chinese language.

Although Jack's overt answer was his comfort level with English language, it was his laugh and self-questioning that was important in illustrating how his choice seemed to have been made at an almost unconscious level. To "suddenly switch to a different language" was somewhat unfathomable to him. Upon exploring further in the second interview, I asked Jack why his extended diary had not reflected any reading in Malay or Chinese. Once again, he explained that English was the language he was most comfortable in. For a triliterate reader like Jack, learning to be highly proficient in three languages was largely attributable to language commodification. This is because the functional role and commodification of language can be very powerful tools to drive and even sustain learning. However against a backdrop of individuals who have to learn and master multiple languages, the difference between commodification and identification of language can sometimes be starkly contrasting. Jack's choice of language for accessing his literate world is a very clear reflection of how his own personal history did more to shape his identification with that language than externally-imposed reasons could. It appeared that the ontological identification with language provided a firmer basis for language preference and by that, shaped his reading choice. This may mean that the transactional experience of the reader can be seen to boil down to what is most strongly ontologically identified.

Fong was a third year, Mathematics undergraduate. Like Jack, Fong was also triliterate. However for Fong, the language she found herself most comfortable in with regard to being literate was Chinese. In the first interview, I asked Fong about her experience of having to learn Mathematics and Science in English whilst in secondary school. The following excerpt is from the first interview.

> Researcher: What happened then when you learnt Chemistry, Biology, Physics in English?
>
> Fong: That time **I'm fine with using** English as a medium of study for science. So I'm, I'm already ok with using that as academic purpose because written English for science are different from written English for literature and they are, they are more, like for academic purposes, they are more technical. They're not very flowery, normally…
>
> Fong: That was what happened to me. So I just like, **I couldn't be bothered so I never actually do something about it although they always tell you, like, English is very important**. Yeah, **I'm fine using** English like to learn science and I'm not going to do anything. I know that I don't, I'm not good in languages, at least in the sense of choosing a course for study and stuff like that. So I know I'm not going to do anything that deviates from science. **So as long as English is enough for me to learn science then I stop there.** So I never actually like learn how to learn the language.

In the above excerpt, the functionality of Fong's language learning bore itself out through the different domains of Mathematics, Science and English literature. Although this excerpt referred to her experience in the past, it was important in explaining how Fong had accepted English as the language of Mathematics and Science and in part, how she eventually negotiated her university course in English. Noteworthy is her use of the similar phrases "I'm fine with using English" and "I'm fine using English" at two points of the interview. Her conscious acceptance of English could suggest not just the 'language-ness' of English as an 'other' language but also her identification of it with her academic domain. In this excerpt also, Fong's words illustrated one facet of the language learner's response to the commodification of language as being externally imposed. Her use of the third person pronoun "they" suggested a separation between her as a language learner and "them" as simply, not her. Despite acknowledging that imposition, Fong's words "I couldn't be bothered" seemed to project defiance. However, further into her talk, Fong's explanation suggested that she had "bothered" and had been able to effectively learn Mathematics and

Science through the English language. In the third interview, I asked Fong about the way in which she identified with the different languages. The following excerpt was drawn from the third interview.

> R: Right. So when you think of English for reading material, what do you think of? And when you think of Chinese, what reading material do you think of?
>
> P: **Chinese is mostly like for leisure like, novels and, yeah, novels and like, news.**
>
> R: News as in national news, papers…
>
> P: Yeah stuff like in my house we used to subscribe to Chinese newspaper. We still do, to Chinese newspapers. So actually I only read Chinese newspaper. I don't read English newspaper cause like, all the formal English, all quite proper and a lot of time, I don't understand. So it's easier for me to read the Chinese newspaper. Anyway, they are the same news most of the time. Like essentially they're the same, just phrased in different ways.
>
> R: So Chinese is story books, newspapers. English? English materials is what?
>
> P: **A lot of time it's academic related or anything you get from the internet, like most of them are in English**.

In this excerpt, Fong's explanation illustrated how clear the language boundaries were to her. Chinese language was the vehicle through which she accessed reading for pleasure and leisure. English was the vehicle through which academic- and internet (often also academic)-related material was accessed. For Fong the undergraduate, the language of commodification (i.e. English) was not the same as her language of personal identification (i.e. Chinese). Fong used her own preferences, interest and abilities to make the languages work for her. Fong's data also showed that a multilingual Malaysian undergraduate in a monolingual country like Britain can continue to have access to reading materials across different languages particularly because of the range of resources made available in the internet and electronic books. Despite being in a monolingual country, Fong had more, not less access to materials in multiple languages. This finding was important because it shifted the focus from seeing the context as being monolingual to understanding that the current context depended largely on the individual's choice. This has important implications for tapping into the reader's agency.

DISCUSSION: THEORISING LANGUAGE-NESS IN TERMS OF LITERACY

Typical to being schooled in Malaysia, the participants were clearly literate in more than one language. The initial impression that was drawn from the participants bore what appeared to be their sense of nonchalance. This nonchalance showed up when they say that they are 'embarrassingly' biliterate, 'only' trilingual or that they are able to read and write in 'just' three languages. For these undergraduates, the linguistic capital seemed to be deeply ingrained in their experience. Their cultural make-up seemed to provide them with the ease of language. Yet, they did not seem to know how to celebrate their multilingual ability in terms of their literacy experience.

In accounting for reading in multiple languages, the ecology of language learning and literacy practise is proposed to be a useful framework. Particularly, this ecology can be explained in terms of three intertwining spaces. The three intertwining spaces are "language learning", "literacy practising" and "choice-making". These three spaces allowed me to

understand the data particularly as it cleaved along the dichotomous experience that was on the one hand, pedagogical and on the other, ontological. By 'pedagogical', I refer to the largely school/institution-inspired goals which the learner is subjected to when it came to language learning. As for 'ontological', I refer to the personal-choice-inspired goals which the reader is continually surrounded by and within which reading choices are made and meaning-making is formed. While this is not to say that they are both mutually exclusive, this does refer to there being a subtle difference between the two.

First, the language learning space sees the readers' early confrontation with language-ness. What takes place here is the reader's wrestle with the differing reading systems across the different languages. Students contend with the sense of language separateness (e.g. the different mediums of instruction used across various subjects), constant judgement in terms of assessments and evaluations and finally constant self-evaluations in terms of their (in)ability to perform in those languages. The more languages there are to be learnt, the higher the strain of reading in those languages. This translates into how the reading skill can come across as being merely a means to the end of language learning. This means that the fundamental philosophy underlying language learning tends to favour successful language mastery over the reading experience. This has important implications towards multilingually-rich nations who may pride themselves of their linguistic capital but may be unaware that such an imbalance in prioritising language learning may elbow out literacy practice. Thus it is important for these nations to take stock of the multiple language learning experience that is indigenous to their communities.

Second, focus shifts to the space called "literacy practising" where practice, habituation and sustenance of literacy occur. In this space, it is presumed that languages have begun to be learnt and the phenomenon of multilingual literacy begins to take shape. However, for the multilingual reader, complications arise when literacy practice occurs at different rates across different languages. This space is where the reader confronts conflicting levels of reading motivation across the languages. This means that one could be highly literate in one language but less literate in another. The reading experience becomes a conflicted one. This conflict bears on the tug-of-war of linguistic and semiotic capital. It is here that readers struggle with a seemingly divisive choice of either mastering more than one language or simply enjoying the pleasures of reading, regardless of language. Thus, for those whose learning history includes this tug-of-war, it is important for educators and learners to be aware of how to mitigate the experience so that multiple language learning continues to be an important and enriching experience.

Third, the space of choice-making is formed. This is assumed to occur at a later stage of being literate. Here, the phenomenon of multiliteracy comes to revolve around priority and therefore, turns into choice-making. The reader contends less with language ability but grapples largely with factors related to meaning-making, need and function. While the opportunity to read across many languages is present, the necessity of deciding what the reading is for, will take centre stage. Here, semiotic capital seems to be more important. This is seen when the reader values meaning-making for the sake of meaning-making. Figure 1 shows the framework denoting the ecology of multiliteracy.
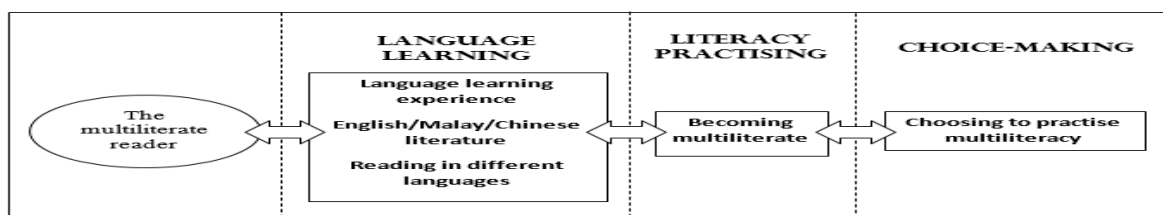

FIGURE 1. The ecology of multiliteracy

To be sure, these spaces should not be assumed to be mutually exclusive. The movement of language learning, literacy practicing and choice-making is fluid and permeable. At any one time, the multiliterate reader will experience a confluence of events. These readers would have relegated specific values as well as pre- and post-conceived notions which together act upon their reading choice. This is because the individual's identification with reading *in* each language would have come from their experiences in learning that language. Particularly, in multilingual contexts like Malaysia, the positioning of the different languages underpins how these languages are prioritised and valued in schools and at home. As such, this study has important implications for national education policies especially as the policies have to do with language empowerment, sustenance and even protection. With so much focus placed on language building, literacy education may be neglected. In addressing this imbalance, there should be efforts in designing contemporary literacy programmes that not only acknowledge the multiplicity of languages in a context like Malaysia, but also incorporate the rationale that being literate is more than about learning a language. It is about meaning-making that takes place across a variety of contexts which in the present day, requires the ability to negotiate knowledge beyond language.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For those who move across geographic borders and find themselves in linguistically different contexts, questions about their multilingual abilities necessarily arise. They stand to gain if they have the wisdom to sustain their initial ability to negotiate across many languages when in their local contexts and still function effectively when on foreign soil. In such cases, it is the individual's indigenous linguistic knowledge that is celebrated because they are made aware of their possession of both linguistic and semiotic capital. As human demography the world over changes, the value of language and literacy takes on ever more complex structures. When scrutinizing the spaces in which readers negotiate language and literacy, we see power, choice and agency as being important within the context of those who have the variety of language choice in their hands. Thus, it is a nation's obligation to optimise both linguistic and semiotic capital in terms of how its own people experience language and literacy practice.

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