

Engaging Language and Cultural Diversity in Challenging Times

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The papers in this special issue have focused on the challenges around the crucial theoretical, conceptual, empirical and practical aspects of engaging diversity in challenging times, the theme of the SoLLs.Intec 2011 International Conference organized by the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Ten conference papers have been selected for this special issue of 3L The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies based on their relevance to the theme of the conference and to showcase some of the important issues raised and discussed during the 2 day conference in May this year.

The papers articulate the importance of valuing plural cultures, ontologies and epistemologies of the ‘Other’ while engaging in a multi or cross-disciplinary research. They emphasise the importance of reciprocal and equitable partnerships in research on diversity and highlight the importance of engaging diverse communities in research. That the world of today is pluralistic, diverse and multi-faceted is an obvious fact that nobody would dispute. We strive for simplicity and generality, looking assiduously for ways to reduce diversity and complexity. This striving for simple and general solutions is often based on genuine pragmatic considerations, and it is easy to perceive it as a freely chosen path.

We should acknowledge the diversity of languages and cultures as normality. Diversity is seen by many as a cornerstone of social, cultural and political well-being. Languages and cultures are an integral part of humanity’s intangible heritage. As tools of communication, perception and reflection, they also shape the way we view the world and provide a link between the past, the present, and the future. Living diversity means much more than simply managing it, and it does not mean we only deal with language and cultural preservation. Rather, it also means that we have to address the practical questions and real situations that arise when different languages and cultures are in contact or in conflict. We must expose certain covert arguments and fallacies without shying away from addressing the underlying political, linguistic, psycho-social, relational and communicative dimensions of the issue.

The papers in this issue address some of the concerns related to language and cultural diversity like classroom approaches, the use of language in varied contexts, and the search for identity. Three papers focused on the use of technology and the teaching of English. In *End-Users’ Involvement in the Development of Web-based Learning Resource for the English Literature Component*, Rashidah Rahamat et al. explore the notion that developing ICT based materials can improve the pedagogical approaches in today’s diverse classroom. The authors discuss the development and evaluation of the usability of a web-based learning resource for the English Literature component in schools. *Development and Evaluation of the English*

Language Literacy System (i-ELLS) for online reading comprehension also discusses another web based tool based on online literacy processes and reading strategies used by multilingual Malaysian readers reading for academic purposes. In this paper, Noorizah Mohd Noor et al. discuss ways for readers to interact with online textual materials that can be personalized and interacted with in order to assist literacy and comprehension of language materials. Ang Leng Heong et al. add to the body of knowledge that focuses on how knowledge of collocations can help language learners to achieve fluency and proficiency. In their article, *Collocations in Malaysian English Learners' Writing: A Corpus-based Error Analysis*, the authors provide empirical evidence on the most common type of collocation errors and give prominence to intralingual transfer as a source of errors.

Moving from the classroom to the courtroom Noraini Ibrahim and Abd Hadi Awang's article *With the greatest respect, I cannot agree...: An Investigation into the Discourse of Dissenting in Selected Malaysian Judicial Opinions*, provide an insight into how not all judicial opinions follow the same set of language or structural conventions. The authors discovered that modality, adverbials as well as context-specific structures, alluding to adherence and mutual respect are employed to temper the emotive tone of the judges. However, non-adherence to such practice has also been identified, indicating that there might be a hidden ideological stance on the part of the judges concerned.

Mohd Faiez Ikram et al. explore the issue of gender inequality in secondary school English Language textbooks in their article, *Verbs and Gender: The Hidden Agenda of a Multicultural Society*. Focusing on action verbs found in 6 Forms 4 and 5 textbooks they posit that enforcing stereotypes of a certain gender under a certain category is not only unhealthy but also detrimental to the making of holistic individuals who should be thinking outside of the box.

Of the five literature papers in this issue, two give us another insight into innovative practices in the literature classroom. In *Sexuality Education through Short Stories*, Gunalingam et. al conducted a study to explore the feasibility of using short stories as an alternative to enhance students' knowledge and awareness on issues pertaining to sexuality. The study was a response to the Malaysian government's decision to include sex education in the lower secondary schools in 2011. The paper reports on the findings, which we believe, should alleviate the fears of conservatives who had voiced reservations about the decision. In another innovative classroom approach, Ruzy Suliza Hashim makes a case for the Literature class as an avenue for sensitising students to social activism and to engage in pertinent issues of national interest. Her paper, *Inculcating Social Activism in the Literature Classroom*, provides samples of literary texts and activities that have the potential to bring about awareness and action among literature students to engage in social activity.

In another two papers by Ravichandran, Yahya Hassan Alwadhaf and Noritah Omar, readers are provided with a fresh perspective on selected postcolonial literary works through the exploration of ideological notions and resistant discourse within them. In *Metaphors as Ideological Constructs for Identity in Malaysian Short Stories*, Ravichandran illustrates how two Malaysian writers use metaphors as constructs of ideology in exploring the theme of identity. By deconstructing metaphors as ideological constructs for identity, the paper also reveals how Malaysian literature in English is closely related to the subject of nation building, and therefore, a valuable tradition that should be both encouraged and developed. In the other paper, *Narrating the Nation and its Other: The Emergence of Palestine in the Postcolonial Arabic Novel*, Yahya and Noritah explore the 'discourse of resistance' within the novel 'Men in

the Sun’ which they present as the Palestinian form representing the Palestinian “nation”. They contend that the Palestinian novel is one of the most neglected, if not totally ignored, genres in the postcolonial and postmodern narrative fiction. The paper reveals how the novel attempts to create ‘a nation in words’ and constructs ‘a country in books’ through its resistant discourse.

In a complete departure from postcolonial notions and concepts, Shahizah Ismail Hamdan takes readers into a new age and a new perspective on identity as she deals with the theme of human subjectivity in her paper, *Human Subjectivity and Technology in Richard Morgan’s “Altered Carbon.”* Her paper looks at human subjectivity as it interfaces with technological advancements as portrayed in *Altered Carbon*, a contemporary Science Fiction novel. She uses the term “subjectivity” in a synonymous sense with “identity” and “the sense of self”. Her paper explicates how and why the mind/body, a basis of human subjectivity but considered as two different entities, are changed or altered due to interfacing with technologies. The paper offers a refreshing take on the evolution of human identity as seen through the imagined worlds of Science Fiction.

It is our hope that the papers included in this special edition can bring us closer to the realisation that in these challenging times diversity is not something to be feared but something that should be embraced and cherished.

