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## Malaysian adolescents and the (re)construction of identities on the Net

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### *Abstract*

Malaysian adolescents, especially those living in urban areas, engage in various forms of writing in English that include the school essay, SMS phone texting, online chat, blogs, notes and poems. The adolescents switch routinely between these diverse forms, pointing to the importance and place of writing in their lives. This paper, which draws on a larger qualitative study, focuses on the Internet postings of a group of Form 4 (Year 10) students from an urban high school in Malaysia. The sociocultural perspective taken views literacy as a social discursive practice that implicates power relations and identity construction. Data were taken mainly from field notes written during observations of the participants in various formal and informal settings, student interviews and students' written products during a period of six months of fieldwork. Findings from the study showed students constructing their preferred identities within the use of a language hybrid comprising a mixture of short forms, "Penang English" and Net English. This paper discusses the implications of such findings for the English literacy education of Malaysian high school students writing in two contrasting domains – the school and the Internet.

### **Introduction**

English is the official second language in Malaysia and a compulsory school subject in the country's mainstream education system. In the everyday communication of many Malaysian adolescents English forms part of their complex linguistic repertoires and could be their first, second or even third language. Malaysian adolescents, especially those living in urban areas, engage in various forms of writing in English that include the school essay, SMS phone texting, online chat, blogs, notes and poems. They switch routinely between these diverse forms, pointing to the importance and place of writing in their lives. This paper draws on a larger qualitative study of the writing in English by a class of Year 10 students in an urban high school in the state of Penang, Malaysia. The focus of this paper is on the Internet postings of a group of boys in the class.

The theoretical framework of the study constituted by social theories of language and poststructuralist understandings of identity is discussed in the first section of the paper. The second section reviews some studies on the writing practices and identity work among adolescents. This is followed by a description of the methodology used for data collection and analysis. The fourth section describes and explains data on the participants' postings in an online forum and interprets these data with respect to identity (re)construction. The concluding section discusses implications of the findings for English literacy education in Malaysia.

## Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical framework of this study draws on understandings of literacy as social discursive practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 1993) and identity as theorized with a critical poststructuralist approach (Gee, 2000/2001; Ivanic, 1998; Miller, 2003; Norton, 1997; Peirce, 1995; Weedon, 1987).

From a social discursive practice perspective, literacy is socially constructed and understood in terms of the social contexts it is embedded in. There can be multiple literacies that vary in form and meaning according to social contexts. Literacies are “both a product of, and a cultural tool for, members of a social group, and are constituted in and through their literate practices” (Crawford, Castanheira, Dixon & Green, 2001, p. 32). The social situatedness and plurality of literacies are seen in the multilingual literacies of Malaysians that show a combination of vernacular literacies and dominant hegemonic literacies (e.g., Gaudart, 1987; Lee, 1998; Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2004). Also included in their repertoires are language hybrids, some of whose features have been described in Lee’s (1998) book entitled “Manglish” and in Melchers & Shaw’s (2003) account of basilectal/mesolectal Malaysian English. As a communicative resource, different literacies are associated with different settings and roles as well as specific domains of social life.

Writing is a communicative resource and a form of literacy. It is a social meaning-making practice that fulfils multiple purposes. According to Lillis (2001), writing is a specific instance of language use. This use is not decontextualized but related to a wider sociocultural context. As a social phenomenon, writing necessarily involves identity work, as identities are integrated with language and values in maintaining a particular practice. The language learner or user as a social being in a social world cannot be ignored and how the learner or user sees him/herself and how others view him/her are central issues (Miller, 2003). The use of writing as a communicative resource depends on factors such as who the writer is communicating with, the identity of the writer, the purpose of communication and resources available. Students not only write from a particular stance, they also position their readers through the way they choose to communicate in various situations.

This is consistent with poststructuralist thinking on the socially constructed subject which views identity as an interpretation of one’s self in relation to his/her surroundings. Identity is seen not as a unitary fixed construct but as multiple and subject to change (Weedon, 1987). The notion of identity adopted in this paper, although in keeping with poststructuralist thinking of the decentered subject that is socially constructed and constrained, signals a process of negotiation and an exercise of choice the subject. Ivanic (1998) suggests a need to adopt a critical poststructuralist approach towards the concept of the socially constructed self. She reminds us that identity is “socially *constructed*” but not “socially *determined*” (p. 12, emphasis in original). It is possible to challenge established dominant systems, which usually occurs when an individual acts in concert with other like-minded social members.

Gee (2000/2001) sees identity as recognizability of a certain kind of person in a given context. The recognition of an identity trait is based on an interpretive system which may be “people’s historically and culturally different views of nature; it may be the norms, traditions, and rules of institutions; it may be the discourse and dialogue of others; or it may be the workings of affinity groups” (p. 108). We can see that Gee has a poststructuralist critical perspective and his approach allows one to view identity work as active and dynamic as “people can accept, contest, and negotiate identities” (p. 109) depending on which perspective of identity is foregrounded.

This paper demonstrates the fluidity and dynamic construction of identities of a group of adolescent boys interacting in an online asynchronous chat, a totally different setting from school.

### **Review of Related Literature**

The review of the theory and research on out-of-school literacy by Hull & Schultz (2001) highlights four studies (Cushman, 1998; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez & Chiu, 1999; Hull, 2000; Knobel, 1999) that investigated different age-groups across a variety of communicative modes that include talking, reading and writing. I add to these studies that focused on writing practices in English, some of which occurred online.

Camitta (1993) found her adolescent students engaged in “vernacular writing” which was associated with culture that was “neither elite nor institutional” (p. 228). The writing included poems, letters, notes, diary entries and others. Shuman (1993) documented adolescents’ “collaborative playful writing” (p. 250) in school that took the form of forged notes of excuse, forms, letters and other texts. Some of these were a series of questions and replies among a network of students. Moje (2000) found poetry, parody, graffiti, tags, letters and notes produced by her students who identified themselves as “gangstas” or as affiliated with local gangs. Moje argued that these written discourses were better understood together with the “body discourses” and “oral language discourses” of the gang members. In the “underground literacies” of the Euro-American adolescent schoolgirls in Finders’ (1996) study, notes bearing highly coded messages were used to exclude outsiders from tight friendship circles. These girls used literate practices to represent self, consolidate their sense of identity and mark social allegiances. Schultz (2002), on the other hand, found her participants engaged in writing that was closer to school writing. They wrote poems, letters, journals, plays, fiction and nonfiction prose.

On the Internet, Knobel & Lankshear (2002) found some adolescent writers publishing “zines” of various textual forms and bearing titles such as Bombs for Breakfast, ROCKRGRL, Deeply Shallow and I’m Over Being Dead. Zines are “a do-it-yourself (DIY) countercultural form systematically opposed to conventional norms and values associated with publishing views of the ‘establishment’ and ‘school’ reading and writing” (p. 165). These candid expressions of personal experiences on subversive and non-mainstream themes attracted a wide

readership, solidarity and responses from others. Duncan & Leander (2000) studied the hidden literacies of young women in online spaces offered by advertising networks that perpetuate a consumerist ideology. The writing on these websites showed the girls either conforming to or resisting existing notions of feminist identity.

Fanfiction writing online is also another area that attracts participation, in particular, from fans of popular fiction. These virtual communities meet regularly to discuss, create and extend popular works that appear in books, movies, television episodes, Japanese comics and other forms of media. Students' engagement and creativity in writing genres outside of school requirements and their identification with members of a fandom have formed the focus of many studies (e.g., Black, 2005; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Thomas, 2005).

This section has reviewed studies on writing practices in English in nonschool contexts. Writing was used by the participants to achieve various social purposes, construct their identity or make sense of their lives. The present study hopes to add to this literature by focusing on the Internet postings of a group of Malaysian secondary school students. The following section presents the methodology used for collection and interpretation of data.

## **Methodology**

This article reports a small part of a qualitative study which examined the English writing by a group of 16 year-old students in a Form 4 (Year 10) class in an urban secondary school in Penang, Malaysia. The participants were made up of 31 students and their English teacher. The names mentioned here are all pseudonyms and the class is collectively known as *4 Science 1*. I played the role of a participant observer (Spradley, 1980) in the six months of fieldwork. Data sources for this article included:

- Formal and informal observations

The class English teacher scheduled 11 writing lessons for formal observation. Each lesson was a double period lasting 70 minutes. All the lessons were audiotaped for analysis. Informal observations took place during free periods, recess time, school assembly and extracurricular activities. These activities included games sessions, prefects' meetings, functions of school clubs and organizations and others. In all the observations field notes were written either during or right after observation.

- Student interviews

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted. The protocol for the first interview was designed using the constructs of self-representation, family, orientation towards writing, orientation towards English, English learning experience and perceptions of schooling. This individual interview lasted 45 minutes and was audiotaped for analysis.

The second and third interviews were follow-up interviews to clarify unclear areas and data that emerged in the field. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The second interview mainly covered three formal

essays written by the students, their responses in the first interview and classroom observation data. The third interview investigated further issues related to achievement, expectations and perceptions of self gathered from formal and informal observations and responses in past interviews.

- Online asynchronous communication

In the first interview, the participants related their use of English in computer mediated communication (CMC) such as Netchat, emails and forum postings. They also provided the addresses of websites which they frequented. From the interview data I could work out their friendship circles and networking. I visited one particular website as an onlooker to read the exchanges of a group of boys in this class over a range of topics.

All data were compared and analysed with data from other sources. For example, data from formal and informal observations of the participants on their network of friends and engagement in classroom tasks were triangulated with student interview data.

Data analysis was two-tiered. The first level of analysis was guided by the principles of grounded theory as well as the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Multiple readings of all data across different settings yielded three broad themes, namely, students' perceptions of school writing, their teacher's perceptions of school writing and students' out-of-school writing practices. The present paper constitutes a portion of the last theme. The second level of analysis involved using the principles and tools of discourse analysis (Gee, 1996; Gee & Green, 1998) and critical discourse analysis (Luke, 1995/1996) to further interpret the data.

## **Discussion of Results**

For the group of students in this study, formal school writing differed from informal out-of-school writing with regard to form, content and purpose. School writing was done within the confines of an approved curriculum while out-of-school writing was not bound by the expectations of school and society. Their CMC exchanges constituted one form of informal, out-of-school and alternative writing.

Wen Kin managed a website (<http://monaymonay.2.forumer.com>) under his screen name Monaymonay. This site has many links and the forum discussion presented below comes under a link known as "Kopitiam Forum." "Kopitiam" is a Hokkien (a local Chinese dialect) word for "coffeeshop," a place where locals like to gather for idle gossip over a cup of coffee or snacks. The following is a set of asynchronous exchanges which took place between 15 and 29 April 2004. The discussion opened with ADMIN asking for suggestions to improve his website. I accessed the direct link (<http://monaymonay.2.forumer.com/index.php?showtopic=44>) to this topic and downloaded their communication which is reproduced in a simplified layout below. Monaymonay is the administrator (ADMIN) while hilluk is the moderator

(MOD). All the participants are boys from 4 Science 1. (Screen names are in Arial Narrow font. Explanatory notes are given below)

1 <sup>1</sup>	monaymonay	post your suggestions or requests here and, ADMIN or MOD will reply ASAP
2	o10+01o	put less sub forums cause penang ppl don't make use of it
3	monaymonay	sub forum are important to make the category keep organize we should train penang people to b more observing ☺ so i think itz good ler
4	D@rk	ban ken's IP address he spam too much ☺
5	o10+01o	i agree with you ADMIN and 1 more requet warn those ppl that post any of our class's member's picture
6	D@rk	got bug at hardware forum when i click on my topic "GE FORCE 6800 HIT 14k" it automatically close my window..!
7	monaymonay	no mentioning of names please. baby way n king of hacker will b ban
8	B@byw@y	admin ar... me want 2 become mod...open a new forum which is about music.....guitar tabs 1...can bo...? n wat have i done...? y kena warning so much 1...?
9	o10+01o	you ask yourself the answer is in your head
10	Hilluk	o10+01o answer ppl politely lar KinG OF HackeR look thru all ur post most of them r spam post dat is y u always kena lar
11	o10+01o	i am so polite liau haven't kan sama dia lagi, what he did and his motif, he knows it clearer than us
12	~~cool~~æ™	how much does it cost for a 256DDR ram????
13	monaymonay	oi!....y u post here! ☺
14	Quacky	well, in my opinion. Only one thing that makes this forum really good which is the members. All the members are so kamlan and they surely have a lot to kapsiau. Thats why all their post is damn interesting. Keep up the good work. Admin, please post poll to

<sup>1</sup>Source: Retrieved Sept 1, 2004, from <http://monaymonay.2.forumer.com/index.php?showtopic=44>

		make it more "hangat". One question, are the girls in charbo thread are real pictures taken with digicam or curi from Internet punya? Do u relly have contact with them. I dun believe them because no girl which is your friend will take picture half-naked
15	D@rk	wah...dun say ppl "kamlan" la
16	o10+01o	Quote (D@rk @ Apr 25 2004, 02:54 AM) wah...dun say ppl "kamlan" la  you are one of them!!!!!!! ☺
17	D@rk	Quote (o10+01o @ Apr 25 2004, 08:32 PM) Quote (D@rk @ Apr 25 2004, 02:54 AM) wah...dun say ppl "kamlan" la you are one of them!!!!!!! ☺  since when i say ppl kam lan in tis forum? ☹
18	o10+01o	i didn't say ur kamlan but u are 1 of them
19	Quacky	Admin, theres a broken link in your homepage in the menu. There are 4 link which is Main,Gallery, Forum and News. The news link cant be accessed, pls attend to this problem asap
20	D@rk	maybe tat part not yet done leh?
21	Hilluk	da onli way 2 make tis forum nice is da members like Quacky say members should post a good post such as can match wif da thread or sumthing n do dun cincai post or post stuff dat make it like it is ur chit-chat place
22	D@rk	kopitiam is the place for we all to chit-chat ma

Explanatory notes		
Post 3	ler	tail-ender expression with no particular meaning
Post 8	ar	tail-ender expression with no particular meaning
	l	also written as "wan," tail-ender expression with no particular meaning
	can bo	literally "can or not?", meaning "May I?"
	kena	get

Post 11	liau	common expression which means “already”
	kan sama dia lagi	angry expression, literally “fuck him yet”
Post 14	kamlan	vulgar expression in Hokkien, usually said in anger or jest
	kapsiau	Hokkien expression for “talk nonsense” or “bluff,” usually said in anger
	hangat	Malay word for “hot”
	charbo	Hokkien word for “girls”
	curi	Malay expression for “stolen”
	Internet punya	Malay expression for “belonging to the Internet”
Post 15	wah	hey
Post 20	leh	tail-ender expression with no particular meaning
Post 21	da	the
	cincai	Hokkien word for “simply”
Post 22	ma	tail-ender expression with no particular meaning

This is a fairly short discussion with 22 posts, most of which were short turns. While there are personal remarks directed at individuals the main theme is to explore how the participants can make the forum a success. ADMIN addresses individuals (Post 13) as well as the group as a whole (Posts 1 and 7). There are many conversations going on between individuals, for example, between o10+010 and monaymonay in Posts 2, 3 and 5 and between o10+010 and D@rk in Posts 15, 16, 17 and 18. These may be one on one but there are onlookers who are following the conversations.

The language used in these exchanges is the hybridized form of English that belonged to the adolescent students in Penang; a combination of short forms, ICQ language and Penang English. The use of this language hybrid to mark one’s identity and social allegiance is discussed elsewhere in Tan (2005).

There were instances of intertextuality as turns were connected to each other within this discussion and also to other information from another thread. The exchanges between o10+010 and D@rk in Posts 15, 16, 17 and 18 contain cut and pasted quotes to challenge and confront each other. In this form of online communication participants can refer to past utterances and quote them, sometimes repeatedly, for further exchanges or discussion. In Post 14, Quacky refers to the *charbo* thread which had the pictures of “half-naked” girls. In this short discourse, the participants performed the task of “connection building” (Gee & Green, 1998) using the cut and paste operation and by direct reference to a specific thread external to this forum.



In what follows I discuss identity work under the headings of observation of rules, membership, reconstructed power hierarchy and male adolescent identities.

### ***Observation of Rules***

In the exchanges above we see interactions that observe rules and respect authority. In Post 13 monaymonay as ADMIN points out (with exasperation) to another member that he has posted in the wrong thread and does not provide an answer to his query. That is, communication is not sustained when a post is inappropriately sent. Another instance of authority is seen in Post 7 in which monaymonay as ADMIN reminds members to stick to their screen names and announces that B@byw@y and King of Hacker will be banned from their site. This is questioned by B@byw@y in Post 8. He asks, “n wat have i done...? y kena warning so much 1...?” which basically means “What have I done to get so much warning?” Hilluk the moderator comes in to explain the breach of regulations that they both have committed in Post 10. At the same time he chastises o10+01o for being impolite to B@byw@y in Post 9 in which o10+01o says, “you ask yourself, the answer is in your head.”

It is interesting to note that this remark made by o10+01o is considered rude but not the coarse language in Hokkien such as *kamlan* and *kapsiau* which are equivalents of the f-word. For example, in Post 14 Quacky uses these two swear words to support his opinion regarding their forum. These words not only describe the members (which include him) but also form the basis of why their posts are “damn interesting.” The use of curse words and coarse language seems acceptable in this context and bears no risk of censure except for one objection in Post 15. Quacky’s use of the f-word *kamlan* brought immediate disapproval from D@rk in Post 15, but this was turned into a joke at D@rk’s expense by o10+01o. Subsequently there was no further challenge or attention paid to Quacky’s use of crude language.

Therefore other than observing some form of netiquette, the adolescent culture also operated on their own ground rules regarding appropriate behaviour. As we can see, these ground rules might clash with the expectations of others, in particular, adults.

### ***Membership***

Participation in this forum was equivalent to membership in the group, in which members were protective of their interests. For example, in Post 5, o10+01o asks monaymonay to warn those who had posted the photographs of *4 Science 1* students on the website. In addition, this website was exclusive and members were careful to shield their identities from outsiders. Note the caution to use only pseudonyms in Post 7. Only the participants knew the real identities of the people behind the screen names in this exchange. In Interview 1, those who participated in online chat said that they knew who they were chatting with. Desmond said he recognized his friends’ nicknames because, “They give me their nickname and their number ((ICQ number))” (Desmond, Interview 1, 21-7-03). Evelyn also said, “And usually their ICQ all ((numbers and other particulars)) I get it from my

friends. Those that I know already. I don't chat with, I don't like to chat with outsiders" (Evelyn, Interview 1, 2-7-03). Therefore they let their "friends" know their screen names. However how wide this circle of friends extended was not clear. While they were very free with their comments towards each other they did not want outsiders to know who they were. Their voicing from the safety of their pseudonyms is another aspect of identity construction.

In the exchanges above the participants' pseudonyms shielded them from outsiders but provided the opportunity for them to connect with each other outside school. However there were other forums with a wider membership in which interactions were performed under pseudonyms that preserved the participants' anonymity. The interview excerpt below indicates Edward was a member of one such forum.

Interviewer: Under forum you have many topics?

Edward: Ya.

Interviewer: So you choose which one you like and you go and talk to them?

Edward: Ya.

Interviewer: Normally are they the same people?

Edward: Different people. That website we've around thousand over members.

(Edward, Interview 1, 14-7-03)

Wen Kin also mentioned interacting with his "computer interest friends,"

Different kinds of people, we chat different kinds of things *lah*. Like with my other computer interest friends, chat, we chat about what's new in the internet and we go check it out. And other school friends, we (2.0) what do we chat? ((Wen Kin thinks aloud)) Gossips ar mainly, ya gossips. About schools, ( ), about anybody, about friends (2.0), about their problems in their schools.

(Wen Kin, Interview 1, 7-7-03)

Both Edward and Wen Kin gained access and acceptance within affinity groups (Gee, 2000/2001) marked by common interests and a set of shared social practices. They were also engaged in different virtual communities, each requiring specific roles (Turkle, 1995).

### ***Reconstructed Power Hierarchy***

In this technology mediated literacy practice there are new forms of subjectivity and multiple subjectivities (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997), alternative identities (Valentine & Holloway, 2002) and "renovated hierarchies" (Weir, 2004). Discourses on the Internet have reconfigured the positionings of this all-boys group of students, positioned differently by school discourses. The roles played out in this virtual *Kopitiam* constitute an instantaneous moment of identity

construction. Elsewhere, for instance, in school these individuals were viewed differently.

For example, Quacky was the genius among them and was often consulted by his 4 *Science 1* classmates to solve problems in Physics and Additional Mathematics. Yet here he submitted to the leadership of monaymonay (Post 19), requesting for an opinion poll to improve the forum (Post 14) and lodging a complaint regarding a technical point (Post 19). Notice that Quacky's posts are longer and more coherent, reflecting a more fluent and articulate use of English than his peers. Being more academically inclined, he shows the ability to sustain argument even through informally written texts that contain "counter-institutional" content.

o10+010 was a prefect who would not hesitate to book students for breaking any part of the school rules. Here he jokes and uses rough language in Posts 11, 16 and 18. In fact, in Post 10 he is asked to be more polite by hilluk, the MOD of this forum: "o10+010 answer ppl politely lar." To this o10+010 replies with even more profanities (Post 11).

Monaymonay was not a prefect or class monitor but he wielded power in this technological territory. He appropriated the discourses of the Internet to build an identity that commanded respect from his peers. Many of his classmates were aware of his activities outside school. In his free time he scouted around for computer parts in shops which only he knew existed. He tinkered with the parts, and modified and assembled them to produce his very own computer that boasted unique specifications. His bedroom was a workshop filled with components collected over the years. His other interests included downloading music online, keeping track of LAN (Local Area Network) parties and aspiring to organize one himself for enthusiasts living in Penang. He also watched illegal motorcycle racing in the streets in the early hours of the morning, and designed websites for a couple of his classmates.

### ***Male Adolescent Identities***

The characteristic features of the discourse above are similar to those found by Davies (1998) in her observation of Year 9 girls' and boys' talk in their English lessons while attending to authentic language tasks in a group. She found that both the boys and the girls in the single-sex discussion groups created group solidarity and identity but they did so through different means. While the girls tried to engage and support each other in collaborative work and often spoke "with one voice," the boys projected individuality and confidence in a competitive and sometimes disruptive atmosphere. They constantly challenged and ridiculed each other. Boys vied "to have their utterances validated by laughter and further comment" (p. 21). They also took risks and broke traditional classroom rules by using unconventional and subversive language, ideas and jokes. They often identified with each other by manifesting heterosexual inclinations that involved discussing "sexual topics, football and fights" (p. 21).

In another study of a group of girls playing an online game, *Babyz*, Davies (2004) found that while some girls showed the traditional positive maternal

identities in nurturing their virtual children, many challenged in subversive play the conventional notions of femininity. *Babyz* websites displayed a range of not only social literacy and technological skills but also identities. Gender-related trends were also found in Guzzetti, Young, Gritsavage, Fyfe & Hardenbrook's (2002) report of two studies of electronic texts used to negotiate and build social relationships. The participants were intermediate primary school children exploring the use of computers as IT tools (Christie, 1995) and two secondary school girls engaging in online instant messaging (Lewis & Fabos, 2000). The two studies showed that girls were concerned with building relationships, whereas boys used online communication to "insult, tease and test limits" (p. 102).

In the exchanges above, the *4 Science 1* boys created group solidarity and male identities through their message content and language used. There were many instances of "risk-taking" in the use of vulgar words. Quacky seemed to be the most dominant "speaker" with his lengthy turns and daring use of profanities. He was open about his sexuality, drawing his friends' attention to the "half-naked" pictures in the *charbo* (girls) thread. Participation also involved openly challenging each other, sometimes with aggression and banter. For example,

"n wat have I done?"

"you ask yourself, the answer is in your head"

"since when I say ppl kam lan in tis forum ☹ "

"you are one of them !!!!!!! ☺ "

Interactions were characterized by an acceptance of ground rules and a show of confidence and wit as the boys interacted online. Even the last post is a witty rejoinder by D@rk to remind them all that *Kopitiam* was the perfect place to say what they liked. One can imagine the fun the boys were having while individually following the "conversation" and contributing their say, post by post.

To complement the data here on the boys' construction of gendered identities, the girls' online communication needs to be observed. As some studies have shown (e.g., Davies, 2004; Duncan & Leander, 2000; Lewis & Fabos, 2000), such interactions are gender-related. However no girl in this study provided me with links to their online messaging although in their interviews a number of them said they participated in online chat. This is a clear area for further research.

## Conclusion

The analyses have tried to show that identity construction is fluid and multifaceted, impinged upon by overlapping and conflicting discourses operating in domains that included the school and the Internet. Combining Miller's (2003) sociocultural understanding of the language learner and Gee's (2000/2001) notion of identity as being recognized within a community of members, this study argues that the language and content of the postings of a group of male adolescents implicated identity construction and power relationships. We see these at work in the way the adolescents sparred with each other as recognized, accepted and privileged members of a virtual "coffeeshop" that observed netiquette and ground rules.

What is more important to ESL literacy educators is the observation that these adolescents were motivated and skilled in the use of their language hybrid to engage in meaningful communication. For those with the resources, CMC technology has created a social environment that encourages participation, as documented by Black (2005), Chandler-Olcott & Mahar (2003) and Thomas (2005). In the Malaysian context the language teacher can capitalize on this mode of communication to generate language output. For example, the teacher can post a reading or an issue and invite responses over the next few days. Without the pressure of face to face communication, weaker students can have more time to post their views while better students have the freedom to write longer turns. These are among the points noted by Beach & Lundell (1998) regarding how CMC can transform adolescent readers and writers.

With regard to the use of a language hybrid, the teacher can expect to find this informal variety in the students' postings. In allowing its use, the teacher is heteroglossizing English, a move that celebrates local creativity and enables the students to claim ownership of the language and construct their preferred identities within its use (Lin & Luk, 2005). This is not to say that school English is no longer emphasized. In fact the teacher can create awareness of the students' idiosyncratic constructions and use these to work towards school English (Lam, 2000). For this purpose, a transcript printout can be used to highlight and suggest alternatives constructed in Standard English. In addition, within their groups, students can take turns to be moderators to monitor language use and simplify or summarize members' postings in the more formal form.

In conclusion, language use and identity work are interrelated issues in a sociocultural perspective of language learning that privileges the learner in his/her social environment. The global shift from traditional print literacy to digital literacy has brought on a lot of CMC and writing on the Internet, some of which are accomplished by using a hybridized form of English. Just how much impact will this have on the teaching and learning of ESL in Malaysia, especially in the urban areas? The findings discussed here suggest the need for more local research to gain further insight into the learners' literacy practices on the Internet and to understand as well as acknowledge them as readers and writers in a digital world.

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