

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL
LITERACY PRACTICES OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE
UNDERGRADUATES IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY**

by

Vivien Chee Pei Wei

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Masters of Arts (English Language)

July 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are numerous people who helped me throughout my long journey. Eventhough I am not able to name every single person to whom I owed so much, I will try to take this opportunity to express my greatest gratitude to those who have encouraged me throughout my academic journey. My acknowledgement here may not be able to express my sincere and deep appreciation, respect, gratitude and love towards these people, but I am writing with hopes that they can feel and know how much I appreciate what they have done for, to and with me.

My academic advisor, Prof Dr Ambigapathy Pandian , who is my academic father, friend and mentor. He has helped me to shape and conduct my study (even though it took a long time), encouraged and guided me throughout the whole process. There are times that I thought of giving up, but he still continued to push and motivate me to carry on. By involving me in his research projects, I have learned new skills and gained confidence in conducting my own research. Thank you very much for that. Your door is always open to me, eventhough I did not have any appointment, you still welcomed me and provided meaningful advice, whether about work or life. You certainly knew how to encourage and push me to do more thinking and writing. With your support and involvement, I have become a better person, both in work and also in research. Thank you, Prof, from the bottom of my heart.

My greatest gratitude to my Malaysian Chinese undergraduates respondents – all 37 of them including the respondents for the interviews, Michelle, Janice, Ying, Kee, Panna, Mike and JP, who were willing to share and spend their free time with me (more than four weeks), and provided useful information as data for this study. You all have been very patient with me, even when I was not sure about some of the terms you

used. You opened your lives to me and showed me another side of the Malaysian Chinese undergraduates' daily lives. Your passion and understanding of the Chinese culture and traditions has made me proud to be a Chinese living in Malaysia, maintaining and preserving my own culture and passing it on to the next generation. Thank you!

My long journey would not be exciting and fun without the companionship of my friends and colleagues in and outside USM. I was lucky to have wonderful colleagues who supported me in the process of my juggling my writing with teaching. Thank you, Chew Saw Cheng, Ng Yim San, Oon Sok Imm and Sachinatham for your strong support and positive encouragement. I would like to express my appreciation to Toh Chwee Hiang, for kindly helping me check and edit my thesis, You have done a wonderful job.

Finally, I want to thank my family. I want to thank my beloved husband, Cheah Chih Hai, for his unending love, support and encouragement. You have always been my number 1 supporter and motivator, without you, I don't think I can finish this. When I was discouraged and depressed, you always said something that cheered me up. To my parents, sister and children, Jeffrey and Kelvin thank you for being so understanding and patient.

Thank you all very much!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii-iii
Table of contents	iv-v
List of tables	vi
List of figures	vii
Abstrak	viii-ix
Abstract	x-xi

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.0	Introduction.....	1
1.1	English in Malaysian education system	2
1.2	Literacy in higher education	3
1.3	Chinese education in Malaysia	5
1.4	The Chinese in Malaysia	8
1.5	Statement of the problem	10
1.6	Objectives of the study	12
1.7	Significance of the study	13
1.8	Definition of terms	16
1.9	Limitations of the study	18
1.10	Organisation of the study	20

CHAPTER 2 – REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0	Introduction	22
2.1	Language theories	22
2.1.1	Cognitivism	23
2.1.2	Constructivism	23
2.2	Literacy and biliteracy	25
2.2.1	Relationship between literacy and biliteracy	26
2.3	Literacy transfer	27
2.4	Language socialization	32
2.5	Language socialization in literacy	35
2.6	The New Literacy Studies (NLS)	40
2.6.1	Literacy and learning out-of-school	43
2.7	Technology and literacy	47
2.8	Theoretical framework	50
2.9	Summary	54

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

3.0	Introduction	56
3.1	Design of the study	56
3.2	Research population and sample	60
3.2.1	Selection of the respondents	61
3.2.2	Selection bias	62
3.3	Research instruments	63
3.3.1	Literacy practice checklists	63
3.3.2	Survey questionnaires	64
3.3.3	Semi-structured interview.....	66
3.4	Pilot study	67
3.5	Analysis of data	69
3.6	Ethical considerations	73
3.7	Summary	75

CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

4.0	Introduction	76
4.1	The respondents	77
4.1.1	Language use and proficiency.....	79
4.2	Literacy practices	82
4.2.1	Types and frequency of reading and writing activities.....	84
4.2.2	Online and print literacy practices	87
4.2.3	Use and choice of language for literacy practices	92
4.2.4	Sociocultural identities of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates	97
4.3	Perceptions of academic and out-of-school literacy practices	103
4.4	Summary	105

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.0	Introduction	107
5.1	Characteristics of literacy practices	108
5.1.1	The nature of their out-of-school literacy practices	109
5.1.2	The medium for out-of-school literacy practices	115
5.2	Perceptions of academic and out-of-school literacy practices	119
5.3	Summary of the discussion	120
5.4	Suggestions and recommendations for future research	124
5.5	Conclusions	126

References	129
-------------------------	-----

Appendix A : Out-of-school literacy practices checklists	142
Appendix B : Literacy practices questionnaire	144
Appendix C : Interview questions	148
Appendix D : Interview transcript 1	149
Appendix E : Interview transcript 2	153

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Tables</u>		<u>Page</u>
1.1	Number of Primary Schools in Malaysia, 2004-2010	6
1.2	Enrolment of Primary Schools in Malaysia, 2004-2010	7
4.1	Perceptions of being bilinguals by Malaysian Chinese respondents.....	79
4.2	Frequency of language(s) used by Malaysian Chinese respondents	80
4.3	Language proficiency of Malaysian Chinese respondents.....	81
4.4	Frequency and language use in reading activities	84
4.5	Frequency and language use in writing activities	85
4.6	Language(s) preferred by Malaysian Chinese respondents in literacy activities	94
4.7	Reasons for using respondents' first language in their reading and writing activities	95
4.8	Reasons for using English in their reading and writing activities	96
4.9	Reasons given for learning the first language by Malaysian Chinese respondents.....	98
4.10	Reasons given for learning English by Malaysian Chinese respondents.....	98

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figures</u>		<u>Page</u>
1.1	Organisation of the study	21
2.1	The Common Underlying Proficiency Model	30
2.2	Social Learning Interaction	34
2.3	Contextual Layers in Literacy	38
2.4	Theoretical Framework	52
3.1	Research procedures of this study	59
3.2	Methods of Analysis	73
4.1	Gender of the respondents.....	77
4.2	Year of study.....	78
4.3	Age range of respondents started to learn first language and English	79
4.4	Frequency of language usage by Malaysian Chinese respondents	80
4.5	Language proficiency of Malaysian Chinese respondents.....	81

**SUATU KAJIAN TINJAUAN TENTANG AMALAN LITERASI LUAR-
SEKOLAH DALAM KALANGAN MAHASISWA BERBANGSA CINA
MALAYSIA YANG MENGIKUTI IJAZAH SARJANA MUDA DI SEBUAH
UNIVERSITI TEMPATAN**

ABSTRAK

Minat yang mendalam terhadap kajian literasi telah mendorong ramai pengkaji literasi bahasa kedua terlepas pandang tentang amalan literasi oleh pelajar bahasa kedua yang digunakan di luar kelas. Amalan literasi seperti membaca dan menulis adalah saling berkait (Badariah, Yah & Nor Adeena, 2011) dan mahasiswa yang tidak membaca pada waktu lapangnya akan menghadapi masalah semasa membuat tugas serta ujian. Pembaca yang enggan membaca ini akan mendapati diri mereka tidak boleh menguasai disiplin akademik yang diperlukan pada peringkat universiti.

Mengutamakan kepentingan amalan literasi mahasiswa, kajian ini menguji ciri amalan literasi mahasiswa berbangsa Cina di Malaysia. Di samping dari sudut pandangan sosial tentang literasi, kajian dilakukan terhadap 37 orang responden berbangsa Cina di Malaysia yang mengikuti pengajian peringkat ijazah Sarjana Muda di sebuah universiti tempatan. Dalam masa selama sebulan, data dikutip dengan pelbagai kaedah termasuk senarai aktiviti yang dilakukan oleh responden yang terlibat, soal selidik, temubual dan perbualan tidak rasmi. Analisis induktif data telah dibuat berfokus pada pandangan responden yang berkait dengan aktiviti literasi dalam bentuk (1) jumlah, kekerapan dan tujuan mereka terhadap aktiviti literasi mereka, (2) penggunaan dan pilihan bahasa yang digunakan (bahasa Mandarin dan bahasa Inggeris), (3) pilihan atau penggunaan medium literasi (bercetak dan dalam talian) dan

(5) kemungkinan hubungan antara akademik dengan amalan literasi dalam kalangan responden (mahasiswa) berbangsa Cina Malaysia ini.

Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa semasa responden berada di luar sekolah, mereka membina ekologi literasi mereka sendiri dengan mengaitkannya dengan kepelbagaian literasi untuk pelbagai tujuan dalam pelbagai bahasa (bahasa Mandarin dan bahasa Inggeris) melalui perbezaan persekitaran literasi (bercetak dan dalam talian). Salah satu dapatan utama adalah responden lebih kerap terlibat secara langsung dengan aktiviti literasi dalam talian yang mereka membentuk kelompok tersendiri sebagai salah satu cara untuk mengekspos diri mereka. Pada masa yang sama, mereka juga membentuk perpaduan dengan ahli kumpulan yang lain. Berdasarkan ciri literasi yang bersifat interaktif dan umum, samalah dengan kecemerlangan aktiviti membaca dan menulis, kajian ini mendapati bahawa keperluan terhadap pengubahsuaian pada literasi mahasiswa yang pada akhirnya dapat menggambarkan aktiviti harian literasi mahasiswa berbangsa Cina di Malaysia.

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL LITERACY
PRACTICES OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE UNDERGRADUATES
IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY**

ABSTRACT

The interest in academic literacy research has led many second language literacy researchers to overlook other types of literacy practices that L2 learners engaged in beyond the classrooms. Literacy practices such as reading and writing are closely related (Badariah, Yah & Nor Adeena, 2011) and the undergraduates who do not read in their free time faced problems when they write assignments and thus perform poorly in tests. These reluctant readers (Ambigapathy, 2000) found themselves not only unable to cope with rigorous academic demands at the university level, but also in situations beyond the school.

Given the importance of out-of-school literacy, this study examines the nature of the out-of-school literacy practices of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates. Within a social view of literacy, a study was conducted among 37 Malaysian Chinese undergraduates who are pursuing their first degree in a local university. Over the period of a month (4 weeks), data was collected through multiple instruments including out-of-school literacy activity checklists, questionnaires, interviews and informal conversations. Inductive analysis of data was employed by focusing on the respondents' engagement with out-of-school literacy activities in terms of (1) amount, frequency and purpose of their out-of-school literacy engagements; (2) use or choice of language (Mandarin and English); (3) choice or use of literacy medium (print and

online) and (5) possible relationships between academic and out-of-school literacy practices.

Findings revealed that when the Malaysian Chinese respondents were out of school, they constructed their own ecology of literacy by engaging in a variety of literacy activities for diverse purposes in different languages (Mandarin and English) across different literacy environment (print and online). One of the major findings is that these Malaysian Chinese respondents engaged extensively in online literacy activities where they sought for and/or created their own space as well as ways to expressing themselves. At the same time, these Malaysian Chinese undergraduates built a sense of solidarity with others through memberships in groups. Given the changing nature of literacy which is interactive and public, as well as the blurred distinction between reading and writing activities, the study found that there is a need to reconceptualise the notion of out-of-school literacy so it can reflect the nature of daily literacy activities of these Malaysian Chinese undergraduates.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country which includes the dominant ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese and Indians. In percentage, the Chinese here number higher than in other multi-ethnic countries except Singapore. Constituting close to 25 percent of Malaysia's population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2008), Malaysian Chinese form the largest proportion of ethnic Chinese outside of mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore.

Education in Malaysia has always played an important role in Malaysia as the mechanism by which to mould a new unified nation out of its multi-racial, multi-religious and multilingual population (M. Khalid, Kartini & Khadijah, 1999). From the beginning, bilingual literacy has been an integral part of the education system where primary level schooling was allowed to continue the vernacular-based national type schools where languages of Mandarin (the formal and literati dialect of Chinese) and Tamil (one of the major Indian dialects prevailing in Malaysia) are used as the medium of instruction. Alongside this vernacular stream, there is the national stream for primary schools which use Bahasa Malaysia (or the standardised and nationalised version of the Malay language) as the medium of instruction. In these schools, English as a second language is taught as early as the second half semester of the first year of school. Thus, after undergoing the schooling process in Malaysia, Malaysian children (especially Malaysian Chinese children) attain English as a second or third language, besides their own mother-tongue and Bahasa Malaysia.

Outside the formal school context, students engage in a more personalised form of literacy practices. For the purpose of this study, literacy practices are seen as normal,

regular and repeated ways of doing things, that are taken for granted by the insider of a group, as discussed and developed in the work of the New Literacy Studies Movement (Barton, 2000; Gee, 1990; Street, 1998). In different domains of social life, literacies are communicative resources that form part of our daily social practices. These literacy practices are plural and vary in form and meaning, according to the social contexts. The social situatedness and plurality of literacies that are seen in the multilingual literacies of Malaysians, especially Malaysian Chinese have shown a combination of vernacular and dominant hegemonic literacies (Nair-Venugopal, 2004). The out-of-school literacy practices engaged by Malaysian Chinese students in this study exemplified the diversity of language and culture in the process of learning.

1.1 English in Malaysian education system

In Malaysia, English is an inherited language as a result of history and a legacy from the former British Empire. The English language was brought over by the British in the 19th and 20th centuries. During the British rule, English was the medium of instruction in schools established by the British. A change in language policy took place after independence which established Malay as the national language of the country in schools and universities. The year 1970 marked the beginning of the transition from English to Malay as the medium of instruction. Today, English is a compulsory second language in the school curriculum. Many Malaysians in their mid-30s and above are very proficient in English, whereas for the younger generation, the level of English has declined as English has been relegated to a school subject (Lee, 2004). It is a subject where, at the end of the primary schooling, students were expected to have enough oral and aural skills so that simple English should be used in a variety of situations. The English language syllabus for primary schools aims to equip students

with basic skills and knowledge of the language, so as to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2004). In addition, the secondary school syllabus aims to extend students' English proficiency in order to meet their needs to use English in certain situations in everyday life, for knowledge, acquisition and for future workplace needs (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2004). Students are expected to read, listen, respond to, present and express their opinions and views creatively in spoken and written forms.

However, the status of English varies, especially for those students who have learned one or two languages at home, before learning English formally in schools. It then, became the second or third language and a functional language for specific purposes.

1.2 Literacy in higher education

Due to the changing contours in the learning environment, today's students in higher education have to equip themselves with various abilities and skills so that they can negotiate the way to make meaning. Advances in multimedia, the Internet, computer conferences, listservs, relational databases and other communicative innovations have necessitated a paradigm shift in the way literacy pedagogy is taught in higher education (Sarjit, 2001). Educators and instructors in higher education institutions have to keep up with these changes in order to understand these 'changes' in the students.

For the students in higher education institutions, acquiring literacy is much more than being able to "psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques" (Feire, 1973). A student has to be multi-literate where he needs to have the ability to carry out numerous strategies competently, or at least at a satisfactory level,

that complies to the demands of certain situations, such as listening to and comprehending lectures in a particular discipline, taking notes, reading academic texts and journals, participating actively in tutorials/group discussions/seminars, improving study skills and library skills, writing up assignments/group projects, cooperating and collaborating with peers and in some instances, being bilingual. In the Malaysian context, where most of the courses are conducted in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, many of the students in higher education institutions are bilinguals in Bahasa Malaysia and English, but there are also students who are trilingual, who use Bahasa Malaysia, English and their mother-tongue, Mandarin. In this context, one could define the situation in the Malaysian school system as the indirect promotion of multilingual literacy with Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and English as the second language, besides students' mother-tongue (first language) (M. Khalid, Kartini & Khadijah, 1999).

Malaysia faces the same educational challenges as other countries in the world – as a multilingual, multiethnic community working with new electronic communications as the new global trend. Some of the important educational dilemmas that are faced include the maintaining of tradition while moving quickly towards the new age of information technologies and international media (Ambigapathy, 2001, p. 13). Given the situation in Malaysia, the conventional interpretation of the term *literacy* as basic reading and writing skills for progress and greater wealth is inadequate in our education development today. The concept of literacy should be examined from multiple perspectives that take into account approaches (historical background, mainstream and alternative conceptions and contextual applications and applicability), relevant issues (political, ethical, economic and sociological), methodological considerations (functional and critical) and case studies (pertaining to languages, gender, ethnicity,

computers and media) (Ambigapathy, 2001, p. 14). Furthermore, studies on literacy have unveiled that the classroom is only one of the factors affecting literacy and that other factors like family, the education system, the media and technology as well as political agendas and strategies do influence the promotion and teaching of literacy in this country.

Jin and Cortazzi (1999) brought forward that the concept of literacy and social practices associated with it have a cultural element. This culture includes the notion of culture of learning which is mediated by literacy. Cultures of learning and literacy are likely to be intertwined and mutual throughout the school years and into the tertiary level and into the workplace of the students. Students from different cultural groups arrive in school with different expectations about literacy and about learning. The increased mobility of teachers and students in the world has brought the attention to the different learning cultures and its connection with literacy. This is especially crucial in the case of how the first language may be used as the dominant framework used for second language literacy practices. Thus, it is important to be aware of some of the dimensions of different practices and what they may mean to the students.

1.3 Chinese education in Malaysia

There is a need to provide an insight into and an understanding of the development of Chinese education. Malaysia is the only country outside mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, to have a completely Chinese-medium education system. The definition of Chinese education in Malaysia refers to the education in national-type primary schools (Chinese), that is, Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) or SRJK (C); national-type secondary schools (conforming schools)

or Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan (SMJK); and Independent Secondary schools (CISS).

The earliest evidence of Chinese education in the then Malaya was a school opened in 1815 in Malacca by a group of missionaries from the London Missionary Society (Ho, 2008). The Chinese classes were free for all Chinese immigrants and were established and supported by the Chinese community where they were built. When the Ministry of Education in Beijing directed all national schools to fully implement the national language policy on prose written in vernacular style (*yutiwen*) in 1920 (Wu & Chen, 1995), the Chinese schools in the Straits settlements adopted the Chinese national language (Mandarin or *Guo-Yue*) as the medium of instruction. Until today, all 1,373 national-type primary schools (Chinese) in Malaysia (Educational Statistics of Malaysia, 2011) are currently using the Chinese language as their main medium of instruction.

Types of schools	2004	2006	2010
National	5,722	5,774	5842
National-type (C)	1,287	1,288	1373
National-type (T)	525	523	529
Special education	28	28	29
Total	7,562	7,613	7,773

Table 1.1 : Number of Primary Schools in Malaysia, 2004-2010
Source : EPRD, Educational Statistics of Malaysia, 2011

Types of schools	2004	2006	2010
National	2,375,093	2,400,089	2,412,089
National-type (C)	647,784	639,310	636,124
National-type (T)	96,129	102,041	101,534
Special education	1,880	1,767	1,776
Total	3,120,886	3,143,207	3,151,523

Table 1.2 : Enrolment of Primary Schools in Malaysia, 2004-2010

Source : EPRD, Educational Statistics of Malaysia, 2011

In the early twentieth century, education for Chinese children in the then Malaya was conducted in private or family schools where pupils were required to memorise prose and recite them with expression. They were nurtured to manifest moral values in their daily lives by being exposed to the traditional Chinese culture, as were included in the Four Books and Five Manuals, the Three-Character Classic, and the Thousand Character Classic, which was a Chinese poem, composed of 250 phrases of 4 characters each, making up exactly 1,000 unique characters (Ho, 2008). All these served as a primer for teaching Chinese characters to children. In addition, the use of the abacus (1-5 beads) and Chinese calligraphy were also compulsory subjects. Chinese education tends to focus on learning literacies and strategies through the habit of memorization. Through her observation on her subject, an Chinese undergraduate named Lim, Koo (2008) confirmed this is true. According to Liu (cited in Koo, 2008), the “best way to acquire knowledge is to memorise it and the best way to acquire a skill is to practise it repeatedly for Chinese society”(p. 73). Memorisation has become a concept in the Chinese education system from the belief that knowledge is memorisable and worth memorising to assure achievement in the future.

At the same time, the Chinese education system is still very much examination-oriented with literacy skills privileging drilling, rote-learning and memorizing (Koo, 2008). Students are required to work hard and this attitude towards education makes the Chinese in Malaysia a disciplined group. As an indirect influence of this education system, the Chinese tend to be highly more achievement motivated, as in the Chinese culture, achievement and goals are often described as being for “the benefit of the group” (Faridah Salili cited in Koo, 2008, p. 73), rather than individual and often defined by other people. Literacy practice in a Chinese environment is underpinned by the beliefs of parents and community. All these are parts of Chinese culture which places high emphasis on education as a gateway to conventional success, especially for the middle-class Chinese living in Malaysia. This is the essence of Confucian teachings to nurture a person to be a good citizen: kind-hearted, persevering and with integrity.

1.4 The Chinese in Malaysia

Due to government policy in education to establish Malay as the official language of the country and the sole medium of instruction, Mandarin has been relegated to become a subject in the curriculum. However, Mandarin was retained at the primary level as a mother-tongue on condition that the content of the curriculum was Malaysian-oriented and in conformity with the national system of education (Leong & Ambigapathy, 1999, p. 180). Generally, Chinese parents pride themselves in upholding their heritage and the desire to have their children educated in their own language and culture (Lee & Tan, 2000). However, Leong (cited in Ambigapathy, 1999) argued that although the Chinese value Mandarin for cultural continuity and identity, they have become increasingly pragmatic in adopting bilingualism. They are

becoming aware of the merit of being proficient in several languages which are powerful in terms of access to education and work. In doing so, according to Lee and Tan (2000), Malaysian Chinese have adopted what may be called multiple identities which is a blend of the past, the contemporary and elements which are essentially Malaysian in origin. In terms of language literacies, Malaysian Chinese have accepted Bahasa Malaysia as the language of the nation, the language for academic literacy in public educational institutions both in schools and universities. All Malaysians who have gone through the national education system would be fluent in Bahasa Malaysia and more importantly, would share a similar education experience.

The Chinese see themselves foremost as Malaysians of ethnic Chinese descent, describing themselves as “Malaysian Chinese” (commonly used). They recognise Bahasa Malaysia as the language of unity for the nation (Koo, 2008), and the language of social interaction in many domains including schools, universities and workplaces. At the same time, for many of the Chinese, English has become another epistemic language in their lives. The Chinese view English as useful for accessing education, business, diplomacy and wider communication.

For some Malaysian Chinese, especially those who have come through primary school education in Chinese, their proficiency in Mandarin is an integral part of their multicultural identities. The emergence of China as a world economic power in the twenty-first century has made them return to being culturally Chinese and speaking Mandarin. However, due to the emphasis places on economic success among the Chinese community, these Malaysian Chinese undergraduates have increasingly focused on functional literacies which will provide them with material success,

recognition and status (Koo, 2008, p. 66). Koo (2008) found that her subject in her study, Lim as a Malaysian Chinese undergraduate, views Bahasa Malaysia as important for their national identity, social integration with other ethnic groups, and for gaining success to university, but also realises its limitation in terms of success to a wider body of knowledge and its failure to deliver full citizenship rights in terms of equality. This shows the Malaysian Chinese undergraduates have a complex view of their multilingual literacies, in the way they accept and master the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, their opinions and hopes towards English as the language of knowledge and their feelings and loyalty towards their first language, Mandarin. All these contribute to the competing and conflicting discourses of their cultural affiliations, functional pragmatism and nationhood (Koo, 2008, p. 67) in a competitive global world.

1.5 Statement of the problem

For those Malaysian Chinese who attended primary education in Chinese, their proficiency in Mandarin is an integral part of their multicultural identities (Koo, 2008). Malaysian Chinese such as those students who will participate in this study revealed that they are both Mandarin educated at primary school level and Malay educated at secondary school level and currently pursuing their undergraduate courses, conducted mostly in English.

A study by Fauziah (2002) found that the school English language curriculum primarily focuses on grammar as a rule of use. A research by Lim (1994) stated that to be competent language learners, learners must be able to know what to say, to whom, in what manner and produce utterances which are appropriate to the context of the event. She found that many of these Chinese students admitted to not being proficient in their

English literacy skills to use it effectively in their lives. In her study on Malaysian Chinese undergraduates, Koo (2008) found that most Chinese students rank their proficiency and academic literacy in Bahasa Malaysia as high compared to their proficiency in English. They admit to having good academic literacy in Mandarin as well as Bahasa Malaysia as the students do their leisure reading in Mandarin and read reference books and textbooks in Bahasa Malaysia, from secondary right up to university level. These undergraduates use English for accessing reference books in the university with Bahasa Malaysia as the dominant language for writing. At the same time, Mandarin is also used as a medium for understanding and expression especially in group discussions with students who are ethnically Chinese and fluent in Chinese. Central to this concern are, of course, issues of cultural and ethnic identity where historical backgrounds and legacies have created milieus within which identity construction takes place, and where social stigmas become attached to particular groups or particular languages. For instance, Chinese speakers of Mandarin look at Chinese speakers of English as “proud” or “arrogant” (Lee, Lee, Wong & Azizah, 2010). Malaysian ESL users thus live and learn in a complex linguistic context, where attitudes towards learning English are consciously or otherwise shaped by attitudes towards the language itself and by the extent to which English is perceived to be a threat to ethnic identity (Mardziah & Wong, 2004). Thus, it can be concluded that these students still prefer to perform their literacy practices in Mandarin or Bahasa Malaysia, rather than in English.

There has been evidence that there is a strong relationship between the amount of out-of-school reading a student engages in and his or her success in school (Anderson, Fielding & Wilson, 1988; Frye & Maruyama, 1990; Stanovich, 1986).

Morrow and Weinstein's (1982) study found that very few children choose to look at books during their free time, and would rather do other activities instead. In addition, reading is closely related to writing competence as shown in Badariah, Yah & Nor Adeena's (2011) study in which they found students who do not read in their free time often face problems during their writing assignments and thus many perform poorly in writing tests. Thus it is clear that undergraduates faced problems in their reading and writing due to lack of comprehensibility of text, inability to interact with text and low motivation for reading (Sidek, 2009). The majority of the university respondents in Sidek's (2009) admitted that being able to read and understand well in English is important and the students also reported that they do have the English reading comprehension skills that they need to cope with their studies in the university. Palincsar and Brown (1985) labeled these students as adequate decoders with poor comprehension and this poses a problem for Malaysian undergraduates when they need to read a lot of academic texts in order to do their assignments. Due to this reason, many Malaysian undergraduates chose not to read, even for pleasure. Ambigapathy (2000) found that 80.1 percent of university students are reluctant readers of English and Malay currently and lack the literacy skills to cope with rigorous academic demands at the university level. This shows that Malaysian university students are facing literacy problems which will subsequently affect their academic achievement at the university.

1.6 Objectives of the study

The study focuses on the out-of-school literacy practices of the Malaysian Chinese undergraduates at Universiti Sains Malaysia with regard to their first language, Mandarin and the learning of English, and at the same time, drawing upon the

perceptions and voices of the participants as members of USM's Chinese community.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- a) To explore the out-of-school literacy practices (reading and writing) of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates;
- b) To explore the Malaysian Chinese undergraduates' out-of-school literacy practices in relation to the language use/choice of first language (Mandarin) and second language (English);
- c) To examine the different domains of literacy practices (print and online) used by Malaysian Chinese undergraduates; and
- d) To investigate the perceptions of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates on their academic and out-of-school literacy practices

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What kinds of out-of-school literacy activities do Malaysian Chinese undergraduates engage in?
2. What language (L1 or L2) do Malaysian Chinese undergraduates prefer when they engage in these literacy practices?
3. What medium (print or online) do Malaysian Chinese undergraduates use for their out-of-school literacy activities?
4. What are the perceptions of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates regarding their academic and out-of-school literacy practices?

1.7 Significance of the study

The descriptions of text as meaningful and intertextual, learners as having more central roles in the process of reading and writing and context as critical in shaping meaning making (Moje, Dillon & O'Brien, 2000) have highlighted the complicated nature of literacy in teaching and learning. Moreover, technological innovations have brought different groups of people into closer contact and have provided more people with rapid access to information, requiring these individuals to learn multiple ways of knowing and being. The realisation that literacy is a complex process and practice has necessitated that literacy educators and researchers to acknowledge that one cannot assume a neat, linear perspective of their learners' literacy processes and practices.

This study attempts to uncover the “seen but unnoticed acts of reading and writing” outside school (Hyland, 2002) of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in both first language and the learning of second language, English. With regard to this, most of the previous studies conducted on literacy practices on first language (L1) and second language (L2) have focused mainly on describing the transfer of linguistic features of both languages concerned such as phonology, pragmatics, syntactic and discourse processing (Hancin & Nagy, 1994; Juffs 1998; Koda 2000; Wang, Koda & Perfetti, 2003). Therefore, the first significant contribution of this study is to provide a description of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates' out-of-school literacy activities, thereby, offering richer and fuller accounts of the nature of undergraduates' literacy practices outside school. It is especially true in Malaysia, which is a multilingual and multicultural country where learners (in this case, Malaysian Chinese undergraduates) have a first language or native language, which is Mandarin, while accepting Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in schools and learning English formally in

schools and university as a second language. In other words, this study will endeavour to investigate the language choice and use of these multilingual Malaysian learners, in order to understand the purpose of using specific languages for certain literacy activities in their daily lives.

Second, literacy research has prompted classroom and literacy teachers to be aware of the vernacular (everyday) literacy activities in their situated communities. It can help these teachers to adapt their teaching to balance these practices outside their educational culture. The teachers may not be familiar with these practices, but by recognizing them, educators or instructors can develop successful learners by referring to students' experiences in language and culture beyond the classroom. With this knowledge, classroom educators may be able to connect their students' out-of-school activities with those in the classroom, and thus enhance students' literacy development. Academic literacy may be enhanced if teachers can find and establish a connecting point between academic and out-of-school literacy activities and involvement of the learners. Learners today will meet many different kinds of texts (Moje, Dillon & O'Brien, 2000) as a result of information technologies. Research on media and popular culture (Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999) suggests that learners increasingly will use television, magazines, popular books, movies, music and the Internet as sources of knowledge and information. To draw from learners' interests and meet their needs, literacy teachers should begin to examine and consider those texts and incorporate them in the classrooms. On the other hand, the study would also help students build their metacognitive awareness about their own learning processes in languages which might directly or indirectly help them strive towards more productive language learning strategies.

Third, this study will help literacy educators and researchers to understand the relationship between academic and out-of-school literacy practices, which may shed light on how the learners explore, write about and teach in multiple and complex identities that these learners construct in various contexts both in school and out-of-school. Bridging the two kinds of literacy practices may make it possible to connect “literacy learning for school and literacy learning for lives” as proposed by Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000). Linking the two areas of literacy practices will enable literacy educators and researchers to understand the learners to explore their existing and new knowledge in order to develop their identities and individuality.

Lastly, curriculum designers and materials developers can integrate more voluntary, out-of-school literacy materials and activities into in-school literacy materials and activities. From the traditional perspective on text as in printed form such as books to a broadened definition of a organised network of meaning, there is a need to recognize that texts are comprised not only on print, but also of other forms of symbolic representation such as pictures, conversations, video, electronic images and performances. Given that there are many ways to “textualise” (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1992) experience, teachers and materials developers need to learn about and draw from many different literacy practices and texts displayed and generated by the learners. In line with the complex nature of literacy processes and practices, establishing a complementary relationship between academic and out-of-school literacy will help teachers and material developers identify and introduce materials that can draw and motivate for learning in the classrooms.

1.8 Definition of terms

This section has been developed to provide the reader with an operational definition of some of the major terms used in this study. For clarity of understanding, the following are definitions of terms as they were applied in this study.

Literacy : the process of acquiring and using the skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change. (UNESCO report, 2006).

Literacy practices : The general cultural ways of utilising language which people draw upon in their lives (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), involving what people do with literacy, what they make of what they do, how they construct its value, the ideologies that surround it. They are patterned by social institutions and power relationships and are purposeful and embedded in social goals. Examples of literacy practices are reading bedtime stories to your child, reading recipes and many others.

Academic literacy practices : Brian Street (1998) described these practices as the central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study, by referring to elements of academic literacy which include reading, writing, listening, speaking and critical thinking, use of technology and habits of mind that foster academic success.

Out-of-school literacy practices : Activities of reading and writing that are not directly related to school or school work, often occurring for fun or companionship (such as reading novels, keeping diary, emailing, internet surfing, and others), but also for everyday practical purposes.

Literacy events : They can be seen as any action, sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role (Heath, 1986). Heath further suggests that literacy events have social interactional roles which regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written, and define ways in which oral language reinforces, advises, extends or sets aside the written material.

Mediator of literacy : This can be defined as a person who makes his or her literacy skills available to others, on a formal or informal basis, for them to accomplish specific literacy purposes.

Domains of literacy : They map the main settings and contexts where people use literacy (home, marketplace, school, shops, bureaucracies, the street).

Biliteracy : Hornberger (2003) defined biliteracy as the use of two or more languages in and around writing and reading or as any instances in which communication occurs. To Hornberger, biliteracy does not encompass only events, but also interactions, practices, activities, programs, situations, sites, societies and worlds.

Transfer : According to Odlin (1989), transfer refers to the influence resulted from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been obviously and perhaps, imperfectly acquired. It can occur at any levels, strategic, linguistic, discourse and pragmatic.

Discourse : Ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, reading and writing that are accepted as unique and instantiations of a particular role (or type of people) by specific group of people (Gee, 1996).

1.9 Limitations of the study

Hull and Schultz (2002) have raised a concern on the “blurring of the lines separating literacy practices in and out-of-school”. There seems to be an unclear boundary between academic and out-of-school literacy activities because school-based literacy practices (such as textbook reading and discussions) also take place outside school and are mostly literacy activities that are not related to school. For instance, students may read or write on their own in order to help build literacy skills inside school, and also may use their free time to write in a diary or journal, compose poems or love letters and so forth. Moreover, academic literacy shares the characteristics of personal and pleasurable literacy activities out of school. In this sense, the dichotomy between academic and out-of-school literacy seems impossible. However, this study is limited to examining any voluntary, non-school related work, regardless of a physical vocation where the activities take place. Thus, out-of-school literacy activities are clearly distinguished from academic literacy activities. By maintaining this clear distinction between these two domains of literacy, then only will we be able to study them in a better way.

In terms of method, it is impossible to observe every literacy activity that the participants engage in outside school. The participants of this study are entrusted to record their literacy activities for a period of a month, but it is impossible to expect all literacy activities that they engage in to be recorded. Regular interaction between the

researcher and participants aids in reminding and encouraging the participants to diligently record their activities. Furthermore, this study examines a group of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates, who only represent a small group of Malaysian Chinese students in a university campus. In addition, the researcher finds it difficult to find Malaysian Chinese undergraduates from similar education and socio-economic background in order to have a group of respondents who are homogeneous. Thus said, the researcher will not attempt to generalise the results of out-of-school literacy activities from a small group of students to the whole Chinese community.

1.10 Organisation of the study

This study on the out-of-school literacy practices of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates is basically organised into five chapters. Chapter One describes the introduction, background to the study and the statement of the problem are presented. It sketches the education system and the historical background of Chinese education in Malaysia and provides an overview of the development of Mandarin as the first language and English as the second language in the country. The aims and questions of the research are formulated. Chapter Two contains a review of the literature related to the present study. This includes a discussion of the research on literacy and biliteracy. It provides the conceptual framework in which a discussion of the role of first language in second language learning is presented. Furthermore, as this study aims to investigate the literacy practices undertaken by these undergraduates, a part of the literature of this study is dealt with what research reveals about language preference, language use, language environment and cultural awareness. The chapter concludes with a section that deals with a summary of the views and hypotheses that reflected the ideas behind

the first language and the learning of the second language discussed in the study. Chapter Three provides a description of the methodology and design utilised in the study. It also describes the population and the research sample, measuring instruments and research procedures. Finally, the chapter ends with a section that deals with statistical methods that are used for analysing the data of the study. Next, Chapter Four discusses the findings which obtained, particularly from the out-of-school literacy practices checklists the respondents updated over a period of one month. The description of major findings in Chapter Four enables us to develop some sense of complexity, uniqueness and richness of these out-of-school literacy practices that these Malaysian Chinese undergraduates engaged in. Finally, Chapter Five discuss the findings in this study while situating the study within the larger filed of literacy studies. In the final part of this chapter, the researcher suggests pedagogical implications and future research possibilities for both classroom and out-of-school literacy practices.

The organization of the study is summarized in the diagram below:

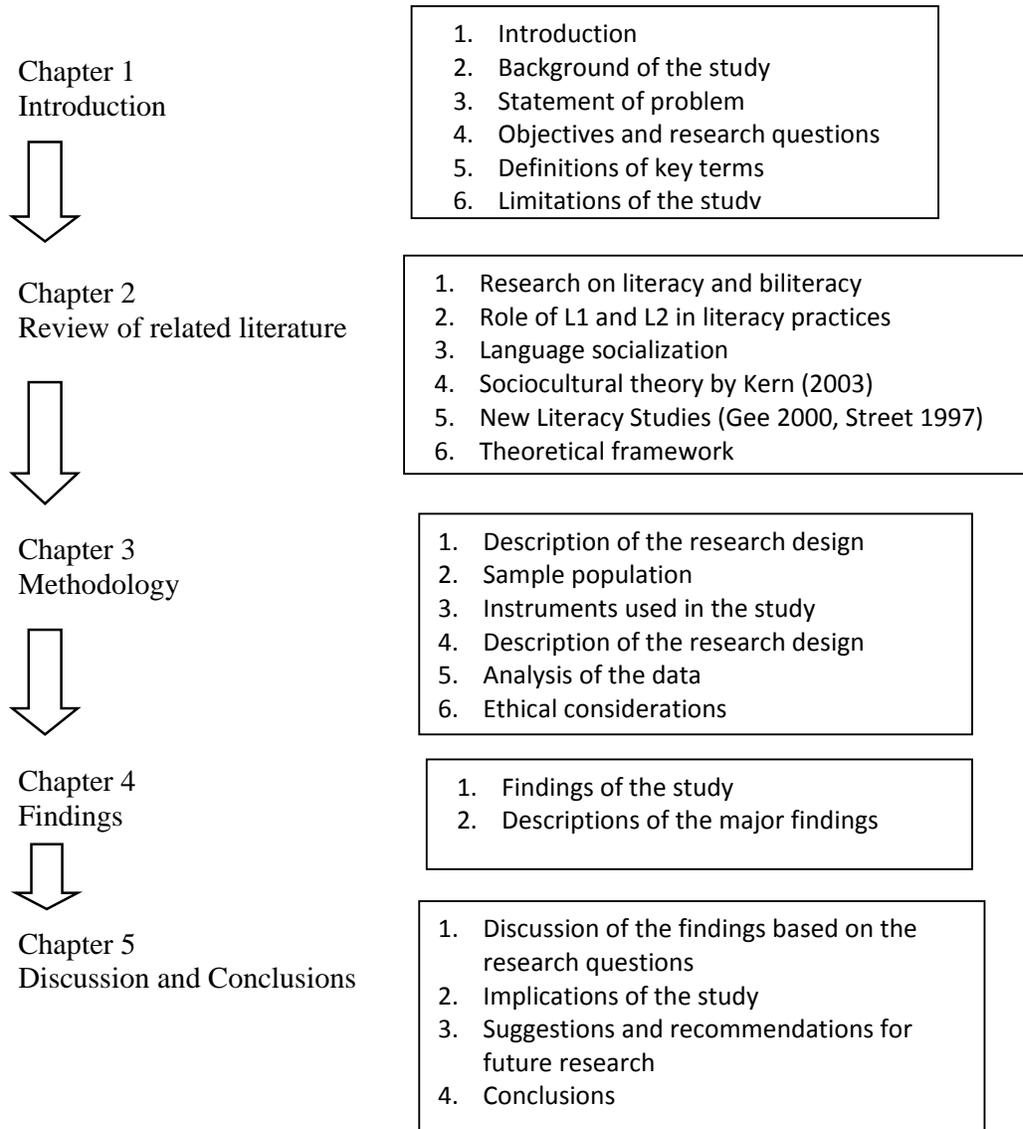


Figure 1.1 : Organisation of the study

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction

Reading and writing ability will become more important in the future than today. This is due to the increasing need for acquiring and communicating information rapidly in a world of global competition and information economies. Success in life means the ability to obtain many types of information more rapidly (Cope & Kalantzis, 1996) by reading, by listening to speech or viewing a video. According to Tan and Richardson (2006), literacy (reading and writing) is a social phenomenon and involves the identity of the language learner, who integrates language and values in maintaining a particular practice. Thus, the rapidly changing lives of the world influence the way students practice their literacy skills and use them in their everyday lives.

For the purpose of this study, elements drawn from various themes and models were chosen and combined to address the research questions of this study. The first section will look at the language theories which are most relevant, while the following section will discuss the theories for second language learning, L1-L2 relationships and literacy and thus establishing a theoretical framework for the present study.

2.1 Language Theories

Today, learning occurs in a variety of ways (Siemens, 2004), through communities of practice, personal networks and connections. Conteh-Morgan (2002) classifies language theories into behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. However, for this study, the focus is on cognitivism and constructivism language theories.

2.1.1 Cognitivism

In cognitivism, learning is concerned more with what learners know and how they acquired it and less with behavioural responses and what learners do. Changes in behaviour, according to cognitive theorists, do happen but they are indirect, rather than direct outcomes of learning. The theorists address aspects such as cognitive processes and higher-order thinking used by learners as they attain new knowledge and skills in addition to the internal mental representations learners construct as they actively acquire information. In other words, cognitivism is concerned with how knowledge is acquired, stored and retrieved. Research has shown that mentally active learners are better learners (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987) and in order to acquire these complex cognitive skills, learners must practise and integrate the skills into an automatic and fluent performance.

2.1.2 Constructivism

Goodman (1996, p. 12) defines constructivism as a semiotic system that serves human beings not only to name “things, actions and experiences, but also represents the way all these interact in all the subtleties of experiences with each other and the world”. Similarly, Conteh-Morgan (2002, p. 192) suggests that constructivism focuses on the “use of language in communicative acts, on the functions of language, and its use in various contexts”. In this paradigm, learners are seen as active participants in the learning process. Some researchers like Nunan (1999) and Speck (2002) define constructivism as “self-inquiry” and as social interaction processes through which the learner transforms knowledge. Speck (2002) explains that learning is both individual and social because “language is social in nature, and with language, learning is severely