

THE *SAMBALIZING* OF IDENTITIES AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN
POST-COLONIAL MALAYSIA

By

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ABSTRACT

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This study is an exploration of the English language learning experiences of four Malaysians who were students in the U.S. at the time of the research. They represent the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia, namely the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The objectives of this study were to explore the ways in which the factors surrounding students' homes, schools, and social realms impacted the construction and reconstruction of their identities as learners and users of the English language. It also looked at how these attributes further shaped their notions of their ethnic, national, and global identities. This study was undertaken with the notion that students' voices are sometimes ignored and unheard, and that hearing them often leads to valuable pedagogical awareness. I conducted this study of lived experiences using Clandinin and Connelly's qualitative narrative inquiry methodology (2000) and phenomenological interviews to obtain data. I gathered students' lived experiences using the three-dimensional inquiry spaces of *temporality*, *sociality*, and *place* and looking at narrative as both the method and the phenomena under investigation. I analyzed, interpreted, and retold these personal narratives in relation to their social significance. The findings from this study suggest how a gradual flexibility in the construction of students' identities as English language learners bears upon their current conceptualizations of their ethnic, national, and global identities.

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To my parents,
Mr. Ponnar Ramasamy and Mrs. Ponnammah Nallaya,
who toiled endlessly to make education a possibility in my life,
even though it was a distant reality in their own.
To them both, I owe everything.

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CHAPTER ONE

Identity and the *Sambalizing* Journey

Nasi Lemak 2.0 was a movie released in Malaysia in 2006 that rekindled the thoughts among its multiethnic population on what it means to be a Malaysian and to have a Malaysian identity. With a humorous touch on social issues, this movie portrays the story of Huang, a young Malaysian chef trained in China in authentic Chinese cooking. He saw many people choosing to eat *nasi lemak* in the stall next door sold by a Malaysian woman of Malay ethnicity instead of his authentic Chinese food in his restaurant. This infuriated Huang tremendously. *Nasi lemak* is a Malaysian rice dish cooked in coconut milk and served with *sambal*, a sizzling spicy sauce that is a great favorite among the local population (an image is provided in the Appendix). Incidentally, *sambal* is also a versatile side dish that mixes and blends well with many other Malaysian dishes without losing its authenticity. Chef Huang realized that his authentic-only stance had failed to attract his Malaysian customers, and soon, at the advice of the next door *nasi lemak* vendor, he embarked on a culinary journey that took him across the different states in Malaysia. He met people from diverse backgrounds, and while speaking their languages and adapting to their ways of life, he learned the perfect blend to gain the much-desired Malaysian identity.

Roy and Subramaniam (2012), in their analysis of the movie *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, raised the question of what constitutes a Malaysian persona within Malaysia's multicultural and multiethnic context. Is it foremost about professing an ethnic identity or a national identity? At first, Chef Huang only had the essence of a Chinese, whereby he would not even serve the delicious spicy *sambal* alongside his authentic *Qiao Long* fried rice. Later, his reflective journey

made him revisit his core identities within the multilayered Malaysian identity. Eventually, he accepted his “Malaysianness” and became *sambalized*. This transformation enabled him to take on a new Malaysian flavor that, apart from food, also flowed into other aspects of his life including languages, cultures, and traditions.

This study is about a similar *sambalizing* journey taken by four ethnically diverse Malaysian students who, similar to Chef Huang, navigated their core self-identities and endured transformations along the way. It explores how these students, who were all educated under a standardized Malaysian curriculum that taught English as a single subject, navigated their ethnic, national, and global identities differently. For some of these students who came from diverse backgrounds, it led to embracing a new global identity, with English at its center. For other students, this center kept shifting as they indulged in newer cultural journeys rarely envisioned in the past. And yet for some others, it involved continuous contestations and negotiations as they struggled with the overlapping issues of ethnic, national, and religious identities, while at the same time striving to be successful partakers in the globalized arena. This study, while narrating these experiences, attempts to understand how the processes of resistance and negotiations had impacted the construction of their identity. It is also an exploration of the pedagogical implications that could be derived from an understanding of students’ lived stories in the Malaysian context as English language learners and users.

The following is a list of key terms used throughout the study. Rather than define these terms in strictly academic ways (with citations of the literature, and such), I have instead used my knowledge of both the academic literature and the Malaysian social context to provide definitions that help the reader understand how these ideas can illuminate certain aspects of the study.

Table 1

Definition of Terms

Key Terms	Definitions as Conceptualized in this Study
Nation	An imaginary construct that is constructed collectively by a community of people who share a common historical memory, common values, common shared destiny and so forth. This is to be differentiated from the term “country” that is defined by physical constructs such as state boundaries.
Nationalism	<p>These are feelings of patriotism and unconditional attachment to particular attributes such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, language, and other identity markers. All these elements may or may not be collective embodiments within the construct of “nation.” Not only is nationalism related to feelings, but it is also planned attempts by various elites to create these feelings through various social institutions such as schools, media, military service, etc.</p> <p>By Malay nationalism, I refer to the national sentiments professed by a particular ethnic group in Malaysia known as “Malays,” who have also self-identified themselves as <i>Bumiputera</i> (son of the soil) who habitually speaks Malay language, conforms to Malay customs, and professes Islam as the religion (Article 160 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution).¹</p>
Nationalist	A person who identifies himself with a “nation” and its one or many identity markers such as the national language, national anthem, national educational philosophy, etc. This definition is highly debatable because the ideals upheld by the nation for its citizens may not necessary coincide with the feelings at the grassroot level. It can also vary between and within various ethnic groups, in relation to the nation and its global identity.

¹ Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

<http://www.jac.gov.my/images/stories/akta/federalconstitution.pdf> Accessed 15 February 2014

Table 1 (Cont'd)

Nation-building	A forced mechanism created by a nation state to instil integration and unity amongst its culturally and ethnically diverse population. It involves instilling deep nationalistic sentiments using elements such as a national language, religion, culture, and shared history. Such sentiments can also be equated with nationalistic feelings.
Identity	A socially-constructed categorization of a person, an ethnic group, a nation, a region, etc., based on common characteristics such as culture, ethnicity, religion, and historical memory. Sometimes certain national symbols or identity markers such as national flag and national anthem might also be attached to this to evoke stronger sentiments. Identity is generally characterized as hybrid, multiple, dynamic, and a notion that can be negotiated, constructed, and transformed. This process can take place at individual and social levels.
Elitism	<p>Denotes social stratification that marks a person or a group as distinctively different and higher in status from the others in terms of ancestry, wealth, intelligence, social capital, political power, etc. It can be acquired through family inheritance, self-accomplishments, marriage, and educational attainments. Elitism can also be associated with particular institutions that produce people of higher status.</p> <p>Those considered elitist in Malaysia are normally from the aristocratic families, and people of certain caliber such as educationists, politicians, philanthropists, and so forth. The rich and the powerful with high English language proficiency and western manners could also be bracketed within this elitism. In the Malaysian context, elitism could also be a self-professed attribute or something that is bestowed upon someone in the form of prestigious titles from the state and the King.</p>
Vernacular education	Formal education conducted in the native languages. In Malaysia, this denotes schooling conducted in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages. These were the three most important languages during the British colonization. Lately two more languages had been added to this: Iban and Kadazan languages from the states of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia.

Table 1 (Cont'd)

Manglish	An informal English speech variety that is widespread throughout Malaysia and spoken in particular social situations by almost everyone, irrespective of their social status, ethnicity, and age. The nature of this speech variety depends on the formality of a context, and the type of people involved.
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The following section gives the background to this study and identifies the gap that has necessitated a study of this nature.

Background of the Study

Malaysia is a complex and diverse country that according to Census 2000 has a population of 28.8 million people, consisting of 65.1 % Malays, 26 % Chinese, and 7.7 % Indians (Gill, 2007). The rest are categorized under “Others.” Malaysia was known as Malaya during the pre-independence period and covered the region in Southeast Asia bordering Thailand on the north and Singapore on the south. According to Nagata (2011), Southeast Asia was connected by sea and land, and has been open to migration, trade, and early forms of Hindu-Buddhist religion with China, South Asia, the Near East, and Europe for more than two millennia. At this time the aborigines, now known as *Orang Asal* or “Original People,” were already living in the inland regions of Malaya. During this time the Malay population arrived into the region from the southern part of China and Taiwan, en-route to Philippines and Indonesia as well as Malaysia. According to Aida Idris (2008), although their origins were rooted in Southern China, the earliest boatmen who came to Malaya through these routes slowly developed their own identity and culture as Malays.

Since the 13th century, trade and migration flourished in Malaya, transforming the region into a dynamic blend of cultures, traditions, and languages. At this time, the local Malay language became the preferred mode of communication among the diverse group of people. The fluidity of this landscape underwent further transformation when Europeans arrived in the 17th century, first the Portuguese in 1511 to one of the major coastal trading posts in Malaya known as Malacca, then the Dutch, who conquered Malacca in 1641. However, it is the arrival of the British colonizers in the nineteenth century that caused the greatest impact on the identity of this already vibrant region when their colonization extended from Malacca to the whole of Malaya. This impact was caused by various issues of state governance and lasted until Malaya was given independence on 31 August 1957. On 16 September 1963, the independent Malaya formed a federation with the states of Singapore, Sabah (formerly British North Borneo), and Sarawak, and acquired a new identity as “Malaysia.” Thus, from this time onward, Malaysia consisted of two geographical regions divided by the South China Sea: the peninsula region previously known as Malaya (or West Malaysia), and Malaysian Borneo (or East Malaysia). Singapore left the federation in 1965 but Sabah and Sarawak remained to this day.

In Figure 1 below, I have given a map that shows these two regions in the Southeast Asian region that now has nine states in the West and two states in the Eastern region.²

² <http://jodisjungleadventures.com/borneo-detail-map.html>. Accessed 15 January 2014.

Figure 1

Malaysia in the Southeast Asian region



Apart from the great impact caused in matters of state governance, the British colonizers also effected various changes in the local scene through the introduction of English language education. In 1816 they established Penang Free School, the first mission school in the country and in the Southeast Asian region. Since then, English education grew and was upheld as the main language of administration in Malaysia, until the pre-independence period when Malay nationalists sought to replace English with their native language, Malay.

Today, Malaysia is battling between two opposing forces; the internal Malay nationalist ideology, and the impending forces of globalization and the internationalization of education. It is promoting national consciousness by using the Malay language and, at the same time, responding to the urgent need for global preparedness by using the English language (David & Govindasamy, 2004). These conflicting forces have led the government to adopt various “top-down” educational policies that have greatly shaped the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian schools and influenced people’s attitudes along the way. Gill (2005) has noted that these are “policies that come from people of power and authority to make decisions for a certain group, without consulting the end-users of the language” (p. 243). Such policies could be detrimental to the benefits of the end users, the students.

Such language debates in Malaysia, with its conflicting purpose and the ensuing policies, have had a great impact on students’ learning of English language, and their identities. In spite of this, students’ perspectives regarding such issues are often over-shadowed by that of policymakers, curriculum writers, teachers, and parents. There should be more efforts to elicit a deeper understanding of students’ perspectives and attitudes in such matters. Currently, there is little effort to go beyond an exploration of the prescribed language curriculum and the identification of teaching methodologies. While these are important aspects of teaching and learning, it is also essential to look into issues of students’ perceptions and attitudes towards the learning and usage of English language. Students are also the co-producers of knowledge in school settings, and therefore our not hearing their stories, and not making sense of them, particularly in the issues of identity, has led to a gap in gaining a better understanding of their learning. There is immense curricular potential in hearing students’ narratives, and not doing so is a waste of learning opportunity, and hence a study of this nature is necessary.

This study is, thus, focused on students' experiences as they are lived across a specified space and time, according to the two important components of narrative studies. It looks at Malaysian students' English language learning experiences with a particular emphasis on contextual factors such as their home and school environments. The locations taken into account in this study also cover the U.S. context where these students studied for their undergraduate degree for many years and have reported how their identities had also been transformed. It is vital to understand their lived experiences in both locations, in Malaysia and the U.S., since the experiences gathered in the former has the potential to impact the happenings in the latter and vice versa.

I used three research questions to guide this narrative study. Firstly, I sought to find out how Malaysian students' perceptions and attitudes towards the English language are shaped by their home backgrounds and schools. My next question is what is the impact of classroom learning on Malaysian students' identity as English language learners and users? Finally, how do Malaysian students' perceptions and attitudes towards English language impact their ethnic, national, and global identities? The above research questions were interrelated in that an understanding of one aspect led to the understanding of the other. Gaining insights into my student participants' family backgrounds enabled me to gather more understanding on why they were sent to particular schools in specific locations, and why their English language educations and usage were structured in particular manners. This understanding on the type of schools and the kinds of people they interacted with, further explained why their learning in the classrooms were shaped in particular manners. Eventually, an understanding of the contextual factors related to home and school will help in gaining more insights into the students' identities at the social realm, in their interactions outside school and in interactions with people from different ethnic

groups. The interrelatedness of my three research questions has led me to structure them accordingly into the next three chapters. As I capture such stories of homes, schools, and the social realm in connection with students' identities, I have also brought myself to bear on their stories. I have done this from my position as an insider in Malaysia, a second generation Malaysian of Indian descent who attended the public school system in the country and acquired English as a second language.

In the upcoming sections, I first describe key historical events in Malaysia pertaining to English language education that have evolved into the current system undergone by my student participants. Next, I provide some details about the narrative methodology that I have employed to conduct this study. This is followed by a brief description of the four students who participated in this study.

The Historical Context

Three key historical forces have shaped the linguistic landscape that currently prevails in Malaysia: (i) the introduction of English language education in the 19th century by the colonial British government; (ii) the gradual rise of Malay nationalism among educated Malays, beginning from the 1920s, and (iii) the impending forces of globalization and internationalization of education beginning from the 1980s. All three forces are of great significance in the ways they have shaped and transformed the thinking of Malaysians regarding the teaching and learning of English language and impacted the formulation of various language policies. All these factors have directly and indirectly contributed to the shaping of students' identities and thus it is vital to have an understanding of such issues.

Introduction of English Language Education

The British colonizers introduced English language education in Malaysia beginning from the 19th century for two purposes: i) to spread the language to the local population; and ii) to spread Christianity. According to Gaudart (1987), this influence can be traced from 1816, when Penang Free School was established as the first English school in the then Malaya, and in the Southeast Asian region. This mission school and later subsequent ones mostly served aristocratic Malays, urban Chinese, and Indians, and prepared them for civil service (Noor & Azahan, 2000). The Malay aristocracy in particular received special care from the British in the form of knowledge of their language and upper-class English culture, to prepare them for administrative positions in the bureaucracy (Roff, 1994). The British considered it their special responsibility to ensure the well-being of the Malays due to their self-identified position as the indigenous people of the land whose sheer number had outnumbered the original indigenous of the land. It was the status of this group as the aristocratics that helped their entry into the Malayan region. The establishment of the Malay College Kuala Kangsar in 1905, the first residential English school for the Malays in the country, was considered as one of these special favors.

The progress of English language education in Malaysia is tied closely to the development of the local vernacular education which had started even before the arrival of the colonizers. At the time of the British rule in 1874, the rural Malay population was already obtaining informal education focused mainly on Al Quran and religious matters in the *pondok* and *madrasah* schools. The British considered these schools as backward and not beneficial for the native's society and economy of the country (Seoyeon Choi, 2010). They soon set up formal

Malay vernacular schools for the Malays, and Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools in the rural areas for the immigrant population they had imported into the country. All these vernacular schools were only at primary level and ended at Standard 6 (age 12). The urbanized English schools, on the other hand, were established at both primary and secondary levels. Students, who completed their primary education in vernacular schools in the rural areas could only continue their secondary education in these English schools. Only a few of the rural Malays and the immigrant population made it this far due to factors related to finance and physical distance. At the same time, some of the Malays were also wary of English language education because of what they perceived as Christian propaganda. They felt that English might pose a threat to their own religion, culture, and language (Zamani, 2002; Mariasoosay, 2006).

For the major part, the British left the Chinese and Tamil education of the immigrant population to themselves but not the Malay vernacular education. The British introduced their own texts and modern teaching methods in these schools and anglicized the Malay language from Arabic to Romanized letters (Seoyeon Choi, 2010). In stark contrast to the Malay schools, the Chinese and Tamil schools developed their own distinct identities using educational philosophies and teachers imported from China and India. In the early stages of the arrival of these immigrant populations, there was a great desire among them to return to their homelands at some point; thus there was an urge to retain their language and other cultural aspects. However, eventually there were inter-marriages with the local population, and some of them eventually decided to make Malaysia their new home. This increasing new national allegiance, beginning from the 19th century, led the teaching content in these schools to eventually acquire a “localized” flavor.

These two sets of education, vernacular Malay Chinese, and Tamil in the rural areas, and English language in the urban areas, impacted Malaysians in many ways. They caused segregations based on race, economic standing, and language of instruction (Shome, 2002), and between the “immigrants” and “natives” (Seoyeon Choi, 2010). Vernacular education was considered to be of lesser quality compared to the elitist English education available in the town areas (Pillai, 1994). From its onset, the purpose accorded on these vernacular schools by the British was to produce “more intelligent fisherman or farmers” (Azman, 2002), so that they could continue their occupations as peasants (Ghee, 1995). According to Hasan (2005), this was a system of “divide and rule,” designed to create a divided population.

Following this impact caused by English language education, Malay nationalism emerged as another major force that would change the Malaysian landscape and also impact the nature of English language education in the country. In the next section I elaborate on how these sentiments grew to be such a big force.

Rise of Malay Nationalism

According to historian William R. Roff (1994), an expert in the study of Malay history, Malay nationalism started in the 1920s when the Malay elites began to regard the British colonizers and the immigrant Chinese and Indian population as threats to what they perceived as their indigenous status in the nation. The Malays noticed a widening social status among the ethnic groups that came with the acquisition of the English language. These Malay elites felt that the “political and economic power [were] concentrated in the hands of those who [spoke] the more favoured language” of English (Crouch, 1996, p. 157). They were threatened by their number and also unhappy about the “identification of a racial group with a particular type of

vocation or industry and ...its identification with wealth or poverty” (Asmah, 1987, p. 63). Husin (1981) has also written about the Malays’ dissatisfaction. He mentioned about the rural Malays’ concern about the growing number of Chinese shopkeepers and Indian moneylenders who were growing more affluent. The urban Malays, who were mostly middle or lower-rung government employees, also looked at these immigrants with contempt, since they were perceived to control much of the country’s economy. Apart from these perceived threats posed by the immigrant populations, there was also a rising dissatisfaction among those Malays who became aware of the three hierarchical groups in their own community: the urban Malay bourgeoisie who founded modern Malay journalism and intelligentsia; the radicals and the English-schooled from the aristocratic Malays; and the peasants (Roff, 2009).

Another factor that led to the rise of Malay nationalism was the Malays’ desire to retain their self-prescribed status as the “first people” of the land, in spite of not having a race-name to define themselves. The British-led census in 1891 had officially categorized them as the “Malay race” (“*bangsa Melayu*”) for the first time in order to differentiate them from the immigrants, the *Pendatang*, or “those who have come.” This eventually allowed the Malays the self-ascribed term, the *Bumiputera*, or “prince of the soil” status, one that has stuck till today, and accorded them certain special privileges denied to the others.

The original inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia from the various aboriginal groups, were, however, left out of this debate. That said, they were eventually brought into the fold as *Bumiputera* much later. Indeed, the native population in the states of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia, the *Kadazan*, *Iban*, *Bajau* etc were also later categorized as *Bumiputera* (One of my student participants living in this region would later confide to me during one of my interviews

with her that this was merely a “second-class *Bumiputera*” status). While such sentiments were going on, Malay nationalistic sentiments were further heightened by the British proposal in 1946 to form a Malayan Union that would recognize the sovereignty of the Malay rulers but that would also transfer further powers to the British while giving citizenship to the large number of non-Malays living in the Peninsula.³ This plan was eventually discarded by the British after seeing the strong Malay resistance.

According to Roff (1987), such Malay sentiments were strong particularly among the large number of Malays from Malaysia (and Indonesia) who were studying in the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo. The group awareness among them led to the formation of student associations abroad that increased their participation in the larger social and economic life in Malaysia, and that regarded the British as a hindrance to their “true progress and reform” (p. 178). To hold steadfast to their identity, certain symbols became necessary for these nationalists--symbols that could potentially reinstate their identity and strength among the immigrant population and restrict the role played by the English language. The establishment of certain nationalistic institutions such as the Sultan Idris Teachers’ College (1922) and Malay-medium newspapers were seen as part of this effort. Apart from establishing such symbolic identities, not surprisingly, the Malays also demanded that a national language should replace English in order to have a Malaysian identity for the multiethnic nation. This idea was verbalized by the then-prime minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in 1964, when he warned the nation that, “if the National Language is not introduced, our country will be devoid of a unified character and personality ... a nation without a soul and without a life” (Hassan, 2005).

³ Lian, K. F. (2001). Construction of Malay identity across nations: Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde*. 157(4).pp. 861-879

Soon, a nationalistic agenda was to become the next historical force that would shape the language policies in Malaysia. It sought to restrict the status of English language education that was introduced by the British in 1861, both as a medium of instruction in schools and as the language of administration.

National Language Policies

The looming Malay nationalistic sentiments described above soon led the government to formulate national educational policies that, beginning from the 1950s, would reflect ethnic Malays' aspirations to reclaim their self-identity from the colonizers and the local immigrant population. Malay language was officially chosen to begin this aspired nationalistic agenda. It was a language with a plausible claim to indigenous status and was widely spoken in the region. It was thought to be able to fulfill the government's aim for nation-building, national identity, and unity among the multiethnic and multilingual groups (Gaudart, 1987; Gill, 2005; Ibrahim, 1980, Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). According to Pandian (2004), the creation of this "new and common identity" was thought to be able to unify the different ethnic groups as well as the "elites" and "non-elites," i.e., the English and non-English speaking people (p. 273). Apart from these reasons, the Malays also believed that elevating Malay language to the position of a national language would give it the educational and administrative backing needed to achieve a higher status (Puteh, 2010) while providing the population with the linguistic capital and economic opportunity that would lead to social and professional mobility (Gill (2005).

The Chinese and Indians did not offer much resistance to the choice of Malay as the national language because the Malays used the issue of citizenship as a bargaining tool. According to Asmah (1987), in the past, citizenship was offered to non-Malays only by right of

birth in the nation, but after independence, it could be given “provided [one] met the three stipulated requirements: residential, good conduct and language” (Gill, 2005, p. 246-247). Once the Malay language was widely accepted, mostly for its unifying role, the government drafted various educational policies and implemented them even before independence. A series of policies were put in place: namely, the Barnes Report (1950), the Fenn-Wu Report (1952) that culminated as the Education Ordinance in 1953, and the Razak Report (1956) that culminated as the Education Ordinance in 1957.

The Barnes Report (1950) contended that the medium of instruction in all schools should be English and Malay, with Malay as the main language of instruction followed by English language as the second medium. It also called for the conversion of all the Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools into Malay schools, citing vernacular education as unreasonable public expenditure. This policy raised concerns among the immigrant population who perceived this an attempt to undermine their language and cultural heritage. These sentiments were particularly strong among the Chinese population. Following this dissatisfaction, two experts in Chinese education, Dr. W. P. Fenn and Dr. Wu The Yau were selected to provide further recommendations. Under the Fenn-Wu Report (1951), they recommended the continuation of English and Malay-medium schools as well as vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools that would adopt, however, a Malayan-oriented syllabus. This committee called for a national curriculum, unlike the previous recommendation made by the Barnes Report. These recommendations, however, were not implemented due to economic recession.

The Razak Report (1956) that came after this rejected the previous bilingual school idea recommended by the Barnes Committee, proposing instead two categories of primary schools:

Standard Primary Schools using Malay as the medium (*Sekolah Kebangsaan*), and Standard-Type Primary Schools (*Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan*) using Chinese, Tamil, and English as the medium of instruction (Mariasosay, 2006). Under an educational policy known as “People’s Own Languages” (POL), these Standard Primary Schools offered Chinese or Tamil classes as single subjects if fifteen parents requested them. The Razak Report also proposed a common content and a “Malaysian orientation” in all these schools.

The following year after the Razak Report was announced, Malaysia was given independence and soon a major shift occurred. According to Israr (2007), Malaysia’s primary concern after this was nation-building and national identity. This aim was reflected in the Rahman Talib Report (1960) that recommended that instruction in Malay as the best means of developing a truly Malayan consciousness. At the same time, it also propagated the continuous teaching and learning of English but only as a compulsory secondary subject. It reported that “English holds a dominating position in international councils and commerce, in the text-books and literatures of the world. A command of it is one of our national assets” (p. 56).⁴ After this, the Parliament passed the 1961 Education Act based on the Razak and Rahman Talib Reports. In 1967, Malaysia’s nation-building efforts culminated in the National Language Act.

All the aggressive nationalistic policies outlined above culminated in a gradual increase in demand for Malay and vernacular schools compared to English-medium schools, and therefore indicate, to some degree, the success of nation-building policies. The Educational Review Committee Report (1960) indicates this shift:

⁴ Report of the Educational Review Committee 1960. Federation of Malaya.
http://satusekolahuntuksemua.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/020_report-of-the-education-review-committee-1960.pdf Accessed: 20 February 2014.

Table 2

Total Number of Assisted Schools on 15th May, 1960 (Adapted) ⁵

Types of Schools	Total No. of Schools	Total No. of Schools Pending Approval
Malay medium	2,338	482
Chinese medium	1,066	257
Tamil medium	811	236
English medium	469	166
Total	4,684	1,131

Despite these trends towards increasing “Malayification” of the population, on the 13th of May in 1969, a racial riot occurred between the Malays and non-Malays in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city. This was after the national election results were announced whereby the opposition party consisting of more non-Malays, particularly the Chinese, had won by higher margin in the Parliament. Official reports stated that a feud occurred between the Malays and non-Malays, with hundreds of people killed and mutilated, and many more displaced. Informal conversations with older Malaysian citizens, on the other hand, will say that this number should be in the thousands, and that the river in Kuala Lumpur, that day, literally ran in blood. Two months after this riot, while the country was still reeling in a state of shock, the then Minister of Education, Haji Abdul Rahman Ya'akub, obviously reacting with further nationalist fervor, announced over national

⁵ Ibid. p. 7

television that from January 1970, all English medium schools would be converted into Malay-medium, starting from Standard 1 and moving up the education system with that group until 1983 or 1984 when conversion would be complete (Gaudart, 1987). The Minister made this declaration without the knowledge and consent of the Prime Minister or the Cabinet.

The English-educated people of all communities received the Minister's announcement about the conversion with dissatisfaction. In their understanding, Malay language was to be made the main medium of instruction, followed by English as a secondary medium. To their disbelief, only Tamil and Chinese primary schools continued to exist, while English medium schools were to be phased out (Gaudart, 1987). In this conversion process, Gaudart noted the plight of the teachers in the English-medium schools who now had to teach in Malay. (Interestingly, this situation made a complete turn-around exactly three decades later, when a sudden revival of English under a new educational policy, caused the teachers to struggle then to teach in English language.)

The announcement by the Minister indicated, how after the riot, the Malaysian government took it as a legitimate reason to intensify its nation-building policies in order to prevent similar occurrences in the future. This dark moment in Malaysian history has since raised people's consciousness about the need for greater multiethnic integration. Even today, in the name of national stability, politicians on both sides of the benches continuously allude to this past ethnic violence and engage in fear-mongering speeches to the public.

After the riot in 1969, English-medium schools still remained for a few more years but their enrolment dropped slightly. The enrolment in the Malay and Chinese schools, on the other hand, saw an increase. During the first half of 1970s, when the nationalistic agenda was at its

peak, enrolment in the Malay medium schools increased nearly three times, as shown in the table below: ⁶

Table 3

Primary Enrolment Trends by Language Stream, Peninsular Malaysia

Year	Malay Stream		English Stream		Chinese Stream		Tamil Stream		All Streams	
	No.	Index	No.	Index	No.	Index	No.	Index	No.	Index
1947	170, 693		57, 013		190, 349		35, 386		453, 441	
		100		100		100		100		100
1956	392, 012		135, 875		291, 224		48, 212		867, 323	
		229		238		153		136		191
1961	503, 041		218, 100		378, 031		64, 355		1,163, 527	
		295		382		198		182		256
1966	575, 991		275, 848		352, 517		76, 691		1, 281, 047	
		337		484		185		217		282
1974	942, 479		61, 846		470, 472		79, 814		1, 554, 611	
		552		108		247		225		343

Source: *Educational Statistics of Malaysia 1938-1967; Education in Malaysia, 1974*

⁶ Rudner, M. (1977). Education, Development and Change in Malaysia. *South East Asian Studies*. V 15 (1). p. 44

The data above goes to show how the educational policies that were born after the rise of Malay nationalism were able to gradually transform the linguistic landscape put in place by the British in the 19th century. From 1970 to 1983, this aggressive transformation process converted all the schools, except Chinese- and Tamil-medium schools, into Malay-medium schools (Pennycook, 1994). This conversion was completed in 1975 at the primary level, at the secondary level in 1981, and at the university level in 1985. Proficiency level in the Malay language rose after this, paving the way for easier inter-ethnic communication and integration.

On one hand, Malaysia was able to put in place a national identity following the Malay nationalistic sentiments that rose from the 1920s; however, an unforeseen force in the form of globalization and the internationalization of education soon caused another historical shift. The overly nationalistic educational policies that had sidelined English language soon revealed Malaysia's global unpreparedness. About four decades after reducing the status of English language, Malaysia was now forced to reconsider bringing it back to the forefront.

Impending Global Force

In Malaysia, globalization and internationalization of education became a force to be reckoned with during the periods of 1980s and 1990s. During this time, like many other nations, Malaysia was also forced to be a member of an increasingly interconnected knowledge-based world with rampant trade expansion and foreign investment. As it became more integrated with the world economy, Malaysia began to gradually acquire a "cosmopolitan identity." Soon it was necessary for Malaysia to produce a more skilled labor force to meet its industrial demands. The challenge for developing nations such as Malaysia was to produce human capital that was knowledgeable, competent, and globally competitive.

However, the beginnings of 1990s was also the period when the Malaysian government realized that its nationalistic policies had resulted in the loss of English language fluency among the people (Nunan, 2003). Teachers, parents, employers, and policy makers noticed the deterioration of English proficiency among students. There were reports of higher graduate unemployment, particularly among the Malays (David & Govindasamy, 2007; Mustafa, 2002). Just in 2002 alone, 40,000 graduates from Malaysian public universities were unemployed due to their lack of English language skills (Mustapha, 2002). Researchers noted a widening gap in English language proficiency among the mostly Malay rural students and urban Chinese and Indians. Thus, the government's national educational system had in fact created an English-speaking elite class, a continuation of the hierarchy that existed in the past.

The Malaysian government soon began to re-think some of its previous language policies (Mustafa, 2002). Even though Malay language was preferred in the fostering of multiethnic unity and integration within Malaysia, especially after the infamous 1969 riot, the need for English was felt for global participation. Furthermore, in 1991, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, launched *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020) that also needed English proficiency for its successful implementation. This, too, was a national ideology, but with a different goal: to aspire Malaysians towards achieving the status of a developed nation by the year 2020. To step up its global presence, Malaysia needed to undertake various steps that went against its own previous emphasis on national language. On one side, it continued its Malay language policy in the public schools, and on another side, the government encouraged and permitted the use of extensive English in the private sector. As part of its liberalization program, it approved new public and private universities, and private colleges. It also encouraged twinning programs with local and foreign universities. But soon after this, the government, realizing the continuing

deterioration of English language standards in the public schools, considered re-introducing the language in the teaching of math and science.

These conversations all followed the call made by the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad for a re-definition of nationalism. He said,

We need to move from the extreme form of nationalism which concentrates on being a language nationalist only ... I feel that we should be a development oriented nationalist. We want our people to succeed, to be able to stand tall, to be respected by the rest of the world ... if we have no knowledge we will be servants to those with knowledge.

(Interviewed by Gill & Hazita, 16 June 2005)

Following Mahathir's announcement, in 2002, English was re-introduced as the medium of instruction (Gill et. al, 2010). This system was called "the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English" (PPSMI), a Malay acronym. This new direction was pioneered in Standard and Standard-type schools at three grade levels: Standard 1 (age 7), Form 1 (age 13), and Lower 6 (age approximately 19), with the idea that by 2008 all the three government examinations at the primary and secondary levels would be in English.

There were many enthusiastic supporters for this policy. Some welcomed English and urged it to be recognized as a "Malaysian language" (Tan, 2005; Mandal, 2005), alongside national education in Malay, and vernacular education in Chinese and Tamil. Others welcomed it due to its rising importance as the global language of commerce. However, this announcement also evoked fear in others who were concerned that the language that was once systematically reduced by a nationalist policy, might now rise to replace the Malay language. At least 5,000

ethnic Malays took to the streets in Kuala Lumpur in this year in 1969 to voice their opposition to this policy, resulting in the police having to use tear gas to disperse them. The group's action was seen by ex-minister Zainuddin Maidin as an action by fanatics who were "haunted by xenophobia."⁷

The resisters of this new policy argued that this was a move towards colonial subjugation. They pointed to a few countries, such as Japan and China, that have risen in the world arena despite not emphasizing English. A few feared that students would be unable to cope with English as the medium of instruction (Hashim, 2003). Doubts were also expressed about the mostly-Malay teachers' ability to teach technical subjects in English after having undergone a Malay-medium education themselves. Chinese education organizations such as Dong Zong also expressed concern over the replacement of Chinese by English in teaching these vital subjects. Some Tamil educationists, on the other hand, gave the impression of sitting on both sides of the fence. Despite these criticisms, the government still implemented PPSMI in 2002. However, it was abolished in 2008 due to intense opposition from the nationalists,⁸ and review reports that pointed to incompetent teaching of the subjects (more on this in Chapter 3).

In the beginning of this section on the historical context in Malaysia, I mentioned three key historical forces that have shaped the current linguistic landscape: (i) the introduction of English language education in the 19th century by the colonial British government; (ii) the gradual rise of Malay nationalism among educated Malays beginning from the 1920s, and (iii)

⁷ Daily Express. *Ex-Minister slams Malay fanatics opposed to PPSMI*. 16 November 2013. <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news.cfm?NewsID=87196>

⁸ Lotbiniere, M. D. *Malaysia drops English language teaching*. 10 July 2009. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/10/malaysia-tefl>

the impending forces of globalization and internationalization of education beginning from the 1980s. Throughout this section, I described each one of these forces to provide the contextual factors that have led to the current English language policies. Understanding these factors are of utmost importance before exploring students' narratives because these are the language policies that impacted the student participants in this study, and had played an immense role in the construction of their identities.

In the next section, I provide a description of the method used to explicate students' stories in order to find out how their identities as learners and users of English language have been shaped and reconstructed.

The Narrative Journey

I have used the narrative inquiry framework propagated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to conduct this study by collecting students' lived experiences and making meaning out of them. This approach enables researchers to draw out the stories necessary for an in-depth study and understanding, through a series of interviews, that otherwise might be hidden. Narrative inquiry has the capability to draw out underlying beliefs, assumptions, and hidden experiences, and further shape new understandings in a systematic manner. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), narrative is the study of the ways human experience the world. It is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories with "a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying" (p. 4). Thus, the narrative inquiry method was chosen for this study because of the meaning and understanding it can give to our lives through stories (Trahar, 2009).

Methodology

I have employed the two important features outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2006), the three “commonplaces” and the metaphorical “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space,” to conduct my study.

The commonplaces referred to in narrative inquiry are “*temporality*,” “*sociality*,” and “*place*” which enable researchers to view a single narrated experience from all angles in order to untangle all its underlying complexities. “Temporality” calls for the positioning of an experience at a particular time and place and is thus looked at in relation to the past, present, and future of the people, places, things, and events under study. In doing this, narrative inquirers are required to juxtapose their own notions of temporality with the lives, places, things, and events in connection to a participant’s life. The second commonplace, “sociality,” requires a researcher to look into the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of both the researcher and the participants. These dispositions are juxtaposed with the social conditions where the experiences and events have unfolded. The third commonplace in narrative inquiry, “place,” refers to a specific physical location where events or experiences under study have taken place.

The other feature of narrative inquiry that is used in this study is the notion of “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space,” in which a researcher positions him/herself as always in the middle of the narrative account, located somewhere along the physical dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social. At the same time, he/she is also required to position him/herself in the middle of the participant’s stories and his/hers. In doing this, a researcher is in a position to examine thoroughly the complexities involved in analyzing a particular experience.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), this framework enables inquiries to travel in “four directions,” inward, outward, backward, and forward, and at the same time they are also “*situated within place*” (p. 49). This feature emphasizes the fact that all experiences are connected and interact with one another, leading on to more experiences. This is done by moving *inward* towards “the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” by moving *outward* towards “the existential conditions, that is the environment”; and by moving *backward* and *forward* towards “temporality - past, present, and future” (p. 50). Narratives gathered in this manner have both social and personal meanings because they exist as a continuum spreading across many other inter-connected experiences (both our own and others), and they are firmly embedded within a social context.

In studies involving narrative inquiry, the narrative form takes a dual role: it functions as a method of study, and at the same time it is also the phenomenon that is under study. Thus, in this study regarding Malaysian students’ English language learning experiences, their stories are the phenomena under study, and at the same time, those stories are also the method used to conduct the research because they are embodied within a framework called “narrative.” Thus, narratives, in these instances, play a dual-role in enabling data to be gathered, and at the same time they are also the product or the form of the data gathered. Thus, narratives are both the methods used to collect data and the form in which they are presented to the world. The findings that are presented at the end also take a narrative form in its telling.

Procedures

In this section, I will next detail the specific methods or procedures used in this narrative study. I chose four Malaysian participants from diverse backgrounds to participate in this study:

two Malays, an Indian, and a Chinese of mixed parentage. The criteria used in their selection were that they should be of Malaysian nationality, and had obtained their schooling there. I decided to use students who are currently studying in the U.S. in order to get easy access to them, but just as significantly, to situate their English learning in a world where travel and cross-border interactions are increasingly common. The participants were first informed of the objectives of this study and the timeframe involved. After recruiting them, I met with each one of them individually, explained the requirements of this study, and I obtained their consent to participate in this study using the form approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

I collected the data for this study over a period of two years with four students. Sometimes I had to schedule my meetings with them far apart due to their personal and educational commitments. I interviewed my first participant, who was also an acquaintance, in early 2012. My work with her was part of an earlier study on this topic, but because the themes we explored developed into the topic for my dissertation, I decided to include her stories in this study.

I told this participant about my study, and she agreed to volunteer. We only met twice formally for the interviews because soon after that she graduated and returned back to Malaysia. My first interview with her covered general topics such as her family background and school life. In my second interview with her, I went further in depth into her school background, and particularly on her English language learning experiences and usage, both in Malaysia and in the U.S.

My interviews with the other three students were held more recently, in late 2012 and early 2013. They had all volunteered for my study after seeing an email that I had sent to all the Malaysian students through the university. In this email, I briefly described my study and mentioned that I am preferably looking for participants from the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Only three female students responded to my email, and I decided on all of them, especially since they were all from diverse backgrounds as I had wanted. I conducted four individual interview sessions with these students. Before beginning my formal sessions with them, I called two of them for a short chat in the campus. I had not met them before, so I wanted to talk with them personally before calling them for formal interview sessions. I already knew the third participant, so I decided to call her directly for the first interview. Similar to the first participant, who by then had returned to Malaysia, I also met these three students at various venues on the university campus. After my four interview sessions with them, I called all of them together for a focus group meeting in my apartment.

Most of my interview sessions with the student participants began in an informal manner, with greetings and questions about how they were doing in their academic work in the university. I only started audio taping the sessions during the formal question and answer session that usually began after about five or ten minutes. Once, the formal recording only took place about thirty minutes after the initial conversation, but this was a particularly rich session where I learned a lot about the student and her future aspirations. On a few occasions, the direction of my conversations with participants drifted to other sensitive and personal issues, especially those related to ethnicity and religion, but I still allowed them because they were related to the topics of identity and experience that are so central to this study. I also considered them as important details to understand the students better. Even though I encouraged such talks, I made sure that

they were not recorded, or in the case when they were, I made sure that they were not transcribed or reported in ways that would violate the trust we had established.

All my formal interview sessions with the students were methodologically driven. I went for all these sessions with a set of open-ended questions carefully prepared under the guidance of my dissertation directors. The questions asked were all open-ended and non-directive. They were intended to help build rapport with the student participants, and also to make the conversation flow with ease. The students were always given ample time to reflect before answering each question. The questions asked were structured according to the needs of the research questions, ones designed to find out about the contextual factors that impacted participants' English language learning experiences and usage of the language in Malaysia and the U.S.

I had four rounds of questioning sessions with the students. My first interview focused on general questions pertaining to their home and educational background. In the next interview, I asked students to reflect and describe a particular event that stood out for them during their schooling life. Some participants used this occasion to speak about several events which I incorporated into my data. In the next interview, I asked them to think of an experience of using English in the school and their classrooms. In my last interview, I asked my student participants to talk about their experiences in using English outside the school with other members in the community. During this interview, I also asked them about their usage of English in the U.S. context where they are currently studying, and their personal opinions on the issues of identity, ethnicity, and language use in Malaysia. I also tried to glean information on their future plans and the reasons behind those decisions. In all these interview sessions, but particularly in the last three, the goal was to have the participants share their life experiences with as many concrete

details as possible. I sought both school and community narratives because I assumed that both settings were important in the understanding of their overall experiences as English language learners and speakers.

After each round of questions, I immediately transcribed the interview to enable me to analyze and pick out particular stories that stood out from the students' lives, that I deemed were interesting and would be of value to my study. Picking out certain stories or themes in this manner also helped me to plan the direction of my next round of questions. Thus, some of the questions asked in the subsequent rounds were follow-ups of the previous ones. After four such individual interviews, I decided to have a final focus group meeting with the three students to enable them to share with one another their experiences of learning English in Malaysia that they had shared with me thus far. They were given time to comment and ask questions on one another's stories. After this initial conversation, I asked them their personal opinions pertaining to the issues of language, ethnicity, national, and global identity. This setting was not only a fitting way for me to signal to my participants that the research side of our relationship will be coming to an end, but also afforded me the opportunity to test out my findings about the implicit meanings embedded in their narratives in a more dialogic and explicit manner.

Once I obtained the data from the fifteen interviews, I transcribed them personally, verbatim, and copies of these field texts were given to the participants for them to do member checks. The first few times, I gave them the transcripts in the form of hardcopies, but later switched to sending them emails of these copies. As mentioned by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), after I had constructed these field texts (i.e. transcripts), I created charts out of them, one for each of the four participants, and across the four interviews. In these charts, or what Connelly

and Clandinin (2000) refer to as “research texts,” I grouped particular stories and quotations thematically for easy reference and analysis. During the final focus group meeting, I gave the three student participants a hard copy of all the field texts or transcripts that I had obtained from them in the past to remind them of the stories that they had narrated to me previously. This was because some of the meetings that I had with them were quite far apart, and so I wanted to give them the space to recall and reflect on what had transpired during the previous meetings.

These research texts then became the basis of my analysis and interpretation of the students’ lived experiences. In doing these interpretations, it was necessary for me to go back and forth with the research texts to form an understanding of how the experiences interlinked and shaped one another in the construction of their personal, ethnic, national, and global identities. I also looked for recurring themes in each participant’s stories and also across their multiple experiences. Finally, I cross-linked all the events for similarities or differences. Since my student participants represented the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), I also looked at the similarities and differences that might occur as a result of these ethnic differences. Finally, as is expected of all narrative inquirers, I then looked at each one of these individual events in relation to the larger social conditions found in the Malaysian context, during their time of schooling, and also at the previous events that had led to the present.

In order to unwrap, understand, and interpret the meanings within such complexities, it was essential for me to position myself in the middle of all these experiences. I have done this, where deemed necessary, with an insider knowledge as a Malaysian and as a student with English language learning experiences in the country.

Information about Participants

As mentioned earlier, this study was concerned about English language learning experiences of four students who had their primary and secondary education in Malaysia and later continued their tertiary education in the U.S. This section now provides some information about the participants before embarking further into their personal and collective stories in the upcoming chapters.

The first student, Azura (pseudonym), was a forty-year-old Malay female who came from a family of eight siblings. At the time of my interviews with her, Azura was a doctoral student in a university in the Midwest. This soft-spoken mother of five was always neatly attired in a *hijab* and is looked up to by the younger Malaysian students in the community as an elder they can turn up to at all times. Azura was born and brought up in a *kampung*, a village in Kedah, the northern state in Peninsula Malaysia, close to the Thailand border (shown in Figure 2 below)⁹.

⁹ <http://travelmalaysiaguide.com/malaysia-maps/> Accessed 15 January 2014.

Figure 2

Map of Malaysia



Azura's mother was illiterate while her father, who attended a Malay school in the rural area, was only proficient in the Arabic language. All communication at home was conducted in Malay even though her elder sister, who was born in the 1950s, had attended an English-medium school. After her primary education in her *kampung* school, Azura was sponsored by the Malaysian government to study in a girls' residential school in Alor Setar, the capital city of Kedah, which was quite close to her village. After three years of study in this school, she moved to a technical school in Penang where she completed her upper secondary education. Yet another

scholarship after this enabled her to study in a college in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. She was here for slightly more than two years before embarking to the U.S. for her undergraduate studies. After obtaining her degree, Azura returned to Malaysia and took up a position in a private firm, got married, and eventually became an English teacher in a secondary school. After this, she studied for a master's degree in a local university in Malaysia, and a few years later, she obtained another scholarship to pursue her doctoral program in the U.S. As I write this, she has already graduated and is now in Malaysia holding an administrative position at the federal level.

Ani (pseudonym), the second student I interviewed, was a twenty-three year old Malay girl. She was the youngest among the four students I interviewed for this study. She was born and brought up in metropolitan Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and yet nothing in her appearance gave away the fact that she was a city girl. Beneath her soft-demeanor, in her *hijab* that she had always worn since her primary school days, there appeared to be a highly opinionated and confident person. Ani studied in public schools in her neighborhood, speaking only Malay at home. Upon graduation from secondary school, she wanted to attend a local public university, just like her older sister. Her sister was the first person in her family to obtain a university degree, and watching her achievements, Ani wanted to follow in her footsteps. Upon the insistence of her sister, Ani applied for a government scholarship to study abroad and was awarded with one. As part of this program, Ani attended a government-funded two-year foundation program in a private college in a state known as Negeri Sembilan. Upon finishing this, she flew to the U.S. for her undergraduate program in the sciences. As I write this, Ani has already graduated and is currently in Malaysia hoping to find a job suitable to her area of study with the fervent hope that someday she will be able to continue her studies.

Sarah (pseudonym), the third student interviewed for this study, was a confident twenty-five years old and was a third generation Indian in Malaysia. She was of multiple Indian lineages, since her grandparents came from Sri Lanka and a few different states in South India. In her family that had multiple Indian languages, English was accepted and spoken as the main language. Just like Ani, Sarah was also born in Kuala Lumpur; however, family moves made her begin her early education in Penang, a state in Peninsula Malaysia. For a year, she studied in a Chinese kindergarten before moving to another Chinese school in the same area for Standard 1. A few months later, her family moved back to Kuala Lumpur where she completed her primary and secondary school education. After this, Sarah undertook a twinning program in a local private college. This twinning program is an academic program in Malaysia whereby part of the foreign degree program was done in Malaysia while the last few years were continued between a year to a few years in the parent university in western countries such as the U.S., U.K, or Australia. (Incidentally, a few years later, Ani also attended this college.) After her foundation program, Sarah came to the U.S. to study for two more years, to complete her undergraduate twinning program in the sciences. After obtaining her degree, Sarah returned to Malaysia to work in a medical center to gain work experience before coming to the U.S. once again to continue with her master's degree. At the time of this writing, Sarah has already graduated and returned to Malaysia. She hopes to gain some practical work experience before deciding on a specialization area for her future studies.

Jay (pseudonym), the last Malaysian student I spoke to for this study, was a thoughtful twenty-three year old girl who was the same age as Ani. Unlike the three student participants mentioned earlier, Jay was from Sabah, the northern state in East Malaysia, on Borneo Island (see Figure 2). She was of Sino-Kadazan heritage, her father was a second generation Chinese

born in Sabah, while her mother was a native Kadazan, the largest indigenous group in Sabah, also known as “the people of the land.” Like most of the others in her mixed ethnic group, Jay had an Anglicized name. She studied in a Chinese primary school in Sabah that was mostly attended by Kadazan-speaking students. After six years of vernacular education, she completed her secondary education in a Malay-medium school. Then she obtained a government scholarship, similar to the one obtained by Ani, to pursue her studies in the U.S. But before that, she had to complete a two-year foundation program at a local institution. Unlike Ani, who was sent to a private college to do this, Jay was sent to a government institution in the southern state in Peninsula Malaysia, Negeri Sembilan (see Figure 2). This was her first trip to West Malaysia and here she lived among the Malay students in a dorm. After completing this program, Jay came to the U.S. to study for her undergraduate degree, also in the sciences, like Ani and Sarah. She graduated last year and, at the time of my writing, is currently pursuing a doctoral program at the same university.

Table 4 below, gives some brief information about the participants for quick reference in the future chapters.

Table 4**Brief Information about Student Participants**

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Ethnicity / Category	Location	Education
Azura	40	Malay (<i>Bumiputera</i>)	Kedah, West Malaysia	Entire education in Malay-medium schools. Primary education in a <i>kampung</i> school. Attended two government-funded residential schools at secondary level in the city, two-year government-funded foundation program in Kuala Lumpur, followed by undergraduate studies in the U.S. Completed doctoral program in the U.S. and has returned to Malaysia.
Ani	23	Malay (<i>Bumiputera</i>)	Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia	Entire education in Malay-medium schools in Kuala Lumpur. Two-year government-funded foundation program in a private college in Negeri Sembilan, followed by undergraduate studies in the U.S. Completed her program and has returned to Malaysia.
Sarah	25	Indian (non- <i>Bumiputera</i>)	Kuala Lumpur	Attended Chinese kindergarten for a year, and three months of Standard 1 in Chinese vernacular school. Completed primary and secondary education in Malay-medium schools. Did twinning program in private college and completed undergraduate studies in the U.S. (same college as Ani's). Completed Master's program in the U.S. and has returned to Malaysia.
Jay	23	Sino- Kadazan (<i>Bumiputera</i>)	Sabah, East Malaysia	Attended Chinese primary school. Completed secondary education in Malay-medium school. Two-year government-funded foundation program in West Malaysia followed by undergraduate studies in the U.S. Currently, doctoral student in the same university.

Direction of Study

I have framed this study using the themes on how homes and schools have shaped the individual, ethnic, national, and global identities of Malaysian students. I have used five chapters to explore these issues, as outlined below:

Chapter 1: Identity and the *Sambalizing* Journey

In this introductory chapter that you have just read, I provided the historical context for this study, the reasons for carrying out this study, information about how the study was carried out, and background information about the students. I also provided the definition of some of the terms that I have used in the way I have conceptualized them in this study.

Chapter 2: Home, School, and Language Attitudes

In this chapter, I describe the students' experiences surrounding their homes and schools, with an emphasis on the learning of English language and its position in their lives. I describe the type of schools they attended and show how perceptions and attitudes differently.

Chapter 3: Classrooms and Identity Formation

While Chapter 2 looks at the larger home-school milieu, this chapter zeroes in and looks at students' classroom experiences and how they were shaped within the Malaysian schools. It relates these experiences with their prior perceptions and attitudes towards English language. This chapter also talks about the language debates that are currently taking place in Malaysia, particularly in relation to the teaching and learning of English language.

Chapter 4: As the Ground Shifts

In this chapter, I move the students' narrations from their homes, schools, and classrooms to the larger social realm. In narrating their out-of-school experiences, I also elaborate on their views and opinions pertaining to issues of language, ethnicity, culture, ethnicity, national, and global identities. It also talks on the notion of what it means to be a Malaysian and to have a Malaysian identity.

Chapter 5: Of Imaginings Far and Near

The major themes derived from the previous chapters on this study of students' identities based on their experiences at home, school, classroom, and the social realm are, in this concluding chapter, summarized. I also reflect on the pedagogical implications of the study, and how my thinking as a narrative inquirer had been shaped in the process of conducting this study.

CHAPTER TWO

Home, School, and Language Attitudes

Students' identities are context-dependent. Thus, upon entering important social sites such as schools, their prior notions of themselves are manifested in multiple ways; older identities resulting from family backgrounds are emphasized or transformed, and newer ones are created or acquired. Sometimes certain attributes can also be bestowed upon them in the form of labeling and categorization. These are often based on factors that range from physical attributes, places of origin, socio-economic background, language (s) spoken, and how they are spoken. Sometimes such social labeling and categorization have long-lasting negative impacts because of the distinct identities and compartmentalization that are accorded to them.

My own story of schooling and classification is an exemplification of this.

In the late sixties in Malaysia, I first entered a primary school in the sleepy town of Slim River, in the state of Perak (see Figure 2). At that time, my friends and I must have looked quite a sight as we alighted from our creaking school bus to enter this school compound. Every day, we arrived at our school after seven miles of a bumpy and dusty ride on the dirt road from the *estate*. This was where our homes were situated, in the oil-palm plantation where our parents worked; at an earlier time they were indentured workers shipped by the British colonial government from South India. They are now naturalized citizens of independent Malaysia. At the time of my schooling, a few of our illiterate parents sidelined the vernacular Tamil school established by the British right at our doorsteps and embraced instead the English-language education in town. Undeterred by the additional burden this imposed on their limited earnings, our parents continued putting us on that bus, day after day, for years, making us learn various subjects in

English and Malay during the weekdays, and our native Tamil language for two hours every Saturday.

Looking back now, we must have looked very different then from the other students in town, since we always arrived at school speaking loudly and incessantly in Tamil. We also arrived smelling of the coconut oil that our mothers rubbed faithfully in enormous amounts on our unruly hair, to keep it in place. Sometimes a drop or two of the oil might glisten down our foreheads, drawing amused stares from the town-dwellers, teachers and students alike. We always knew those looks, but those stories were never brought home to our tired parents. In such an educational setting, it was the norm that most of us, *the estate people*, embraced failure. A few of us nevertheless, somehow always managed to crawl out of that crack, and years later pondered about those days in the distant past when our rustic simplicity brushed against the Englishness and modernity of the town. Our reminiscing often brought back images of the dusty dirt road and our meek entrance into the town setting that provided glimpses of a world so distant from our own. These snippets of life, for me at least, always brought back thoughts about the subtle and sometimes not so subtle *Othering* that often is crystallized in our traditional ways of being, as opposed to the English-speaking others.

Did Azura, born and brought up in a *kampung* speaking only Malay language, feel the *Othering* too when her journey took her to the city at the age of thirteen? How about Ani, the city girl whose schooling exposed her to another possibility? How different was it for Sarah and Jay, who came from different home backgrounds and school systems that bestowed upon them a certain elitism not found in the first two students? In their case, did they become the condescending *Others* who accorded upon others certain compartmentalizing social labels?

In this chapter, I explore particular instances, similar to my *estate* story, that might possibly shed light on how these four students' perceptions and attitudes towards the English language were shaped and reconstructed within their various home and school settings. I have done this by narrating their individual stories and by comparing and contrasting them with one another, and finally by juxtaposing them with the larger social context, both at the national and global level.

Home and School Stories

In this section, I first narrate the schooling life of Azura, the Malay participant from Kedah, who attended a *kampung* school from the age of seven before moving to an elite residential school for the next five years. Next, I describe the lived experiences of Ani, also of Malay ethnicity, who attended regular Malay-medium schools at both the primary and the secondary levels in an urban setting. Sarah, the next participant, was of Indian origin; she attended a Chinese kindergarten and a vernacular Chinese school for slightly over a year before moving to an *elite* public school to complete her primary education, and later to a regular secondary school. After exploring the above stories of Azura, Ani, and Sarah, who were from two different states in Peninsula Malaysia, I will next continue my narration with Jay, who is of Sino-Kadazan origin, from Sabah in West Malaysia. She attended a Chinese vernacular school that had a strong Kadazan identity before moving to an elite secondary school, also in Sabah, her home state. In the narration of these stories, I hope to find out how these Malaysian students' perceptions and attitudes towards the English language, as learners and users of the language, were shaped by their home backgrounds and schools.

The “Kampung” Girl

If a foreign visitor to Malaysia was to shift her gaze from the oil palm and rubber *estate* plantations to another direction in the vast rural area, she would notice a unique landscape locally known as a *kampung*. This is a rural traditional village settlement that was a part of the Malaysian scenery for centuries and evolved over the years without losing its core structural and aesthetic identity. This living space is usually associated with the Malays, even though people of other ethnicities also live here in smaller numbers. The wooden houses built in this landscape are simply known as the “*kampung* houses.” (An image is provided in the Appendix.)

These wooden houses, built with thatched walls and roofs, stand on stilts to keep the floods away, and are fitted with large windows to enhance ventilation. They are often built without fences around them, in line with the concept of openness, both to be a part of the lush tropical greenery surrounding them and to enhance the concept of neighborly kinship. This latter quality is evident in the large interior spaces particularly kept for family activities and social events. Such is the simplicity of these houses and the inhabitants living within them. Many western researchers have lived in such *kampung* houses while conducting their research in Malaysia. One of them is William R. Roff, who studied the origins of Malay nationalism and Islam for more than fifty years.

Azura, the sixth child in a family of eight, was born and raised in such a setting in the state of Kedah. As is the norm for everyone living here, she too grew up conversing only in her native Malay language. Two of her older siblings had attended English-medium schools that still existed during their time of schooling; her sister had all her subjects taught in English, with Malay as a single subject; her brother, on the other hand, had learned three subjects in English,

similar to my own background. And yet English was never heard in Azura's household. The irony in this situation was that just a few miles away from her home, in Alor Star which is the capital city of Kedah, the English language was playing a significant role in many people's lives. Unlike in the *kampung* and *estate* settings, English existed in this urban setting as an equally important language, along with the Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages. Even though two decades had passed since Malaysia obtained its independence from the British, it seemed as though not much had changed in the status of the English language, at least among some people in this city. Its importance could not be contained, even within its limited status as the second language. Thus, Azura grew up in a *kampung* setting, studying in a Malay-medium primary school for six years, oblivious of the looming importance of the English language just a few miles away from her home.

Azura's exposure to the English language was limited to the daily forty minute-lessons that she obtained in her rural school. This was an old, wooden building from the 1920s that was situated just across the paddy field from her house. In this school, she remembered that she had a Malay teacher, an elderly person close to her retirement age, who taught her English. "She didn't really care about us. The rural teachers did not really work hard for the students," she recalled. According to her, some of these English lessons were even conducted in the Malay language. The same teachers taught a few subjects, and sometimes one subject seamlessly blended into the next. "Sometimes we won't even know the subject had changed," Azura laughed. What did she think about the quality of the teaching of English, I wanted to know. "We didn't get anything from them until Standard 5 when we had the *Penilaian* exam (age 11). Before the exam, I didn't get anything and I didn't understand English," said Azura. "I didn't know that I was so bad in English at that time," she added wryly. At the time of Azura's schooling, Standard 5 was the

grade level when all the public schools throughout the nation bustled as they prepared their students for the national examination. In preparation for this English test, students were drilled and told to memorize various language structures that had a high probability of being tested in the examination.

Thus, for the entire duration of her primary school, English was almost like a foreign language for Azura, with the only exposure in school limited to studying for examination purposes. The linguistic scenery that existed in the nearby town did not dawn upon Azura. This realization only came to her as a thirteen-year old, when for the first time she set foot in a residential school in this town with a government scholarship.

“Rancangan Khas” student.

When Azura entered her new school for the first time, she felt that she was “the strangest among all the people there,” not knowing the ways of this prestigious girls’ school, which was also one of the top schools in the nation. For the first time there, she met rich-looking Malay girls who came from throughout the state and had certain mannerisms that marked them differently. She noted how they were not just good in English but good in everything. They also often switched to Malay whenever they were with students from the rural area. “As though, we were *kampung* girls who cannot speak English!” exclaimed Azura thinking of her school days. For her, they were show-offs who looked down at the *kampung* students. “They are not bad people,” said Azura “but I never really mixed with them. But I know they existed!”

The existence of these new students could not be missed because they walked along the school corridor in their glaringly different dressing. In the Malaysian secondary schools, Malay girls usually wore *baju kurung*, which consisted of a long-sleeved, loose white top that reached

the knees, and a turquoise skirt that reached the ankles. The non-Malay students, on the other hand, wore a white blouse that was usually short-sleeved, and over that they pulled over a turquoise, knee-length pinafore dress. It surprised Azura that these modern Malay girls wore the dress instead of the *baju kurung*. For the next five years, Azura studied in such an environment, the first three years with Malay students only, and the last two years in another elite school in the nearby state of Penang. This second school exposed Azura for the first time to English-speaking Chinese and Indian classmates who also looked “high-class” and sophisticated in their ways.

Apart from all these differences, Azura also noticed how they were grouped in different classrooms. The students from the rural area like her, who had entered the school with a scholarship, were labeled and put separately in the “Special Program,” or the *Rancangan Khas* (RK) group. Thus, throughout her secondary school education, Azura saw herself branded as an RK student, unlike the others who came from a “different kind of family,” in spite of all of them being Malays. This became a label that the school assigned to her and it stuck with her throughout her secondary school. Apart from that, the other names that stuck were that she was from a rural area and was a non-speaker of the English language. Not surprisingly, during the years spent in both her residential schools, Azura was never able to gain in-group membership in this group of modern English-speaking students. She remained an outsider for a long time, according to her, almost like a stranger within her own community.

Soon, Azura’s low perception of herself changed when deep inside she gradually realized that the grouping system practiced by the school was not necessarily an indication of her intelligence, since she knew that she was a good student. “I was hard working. I always got straight A’s until I finished *SPM* exam,” she said of her secondary school qualifying examination.

Furthermore, in her own RK group, she was among the top students, and she was always put in the “Set A” class for English lessons. Thus, on one side, she had high regards about her academic standing as a student, but in terms of her proficiency in the English language, she felt inadequate. In the primary school in her *kampung*, it did not matter, but now it did, because she was surrounded by English-speaking students who exuberated a lot of confidence.

The “City” Girls

Both Ani and Sarah, the 23 year-old Malay and the 25-year-old Indian students, respectively, were born and brought up in metropolitan Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, often abbreviated as K.L. by the local population.

Kuala Lumpur, the largest city in Malaysia, is located in the center of Selangor state in Peninsula Malaysia. This Federal Territory has a population of about 1.6 million people. With its humble beginnings that started in the 1850s, it only obtained the status as a city in 1972. In the Malay language, the name Kuala Lumpur literally means “muddy confluence,” named for its location at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers. This city is an attractive fusion of the old and new, the colonial architecture constantly reminding one of its historical heritage as the skyscrapers continue rising above the city. Kuala Lumpur is now the center of a fast-growing economy that also caters to various multicultural activities, in line with its *Malaysia Truly Asia* slogan. In recent years, since the onset of globalization more than anything, it is also showing rapid progress as an educational hub for public and private education in the Southeast Asian region.

Such is the nature of the city where both Ani and Sarah obtained most of their primary and secondary school education. This section explores their narratives surrounding their homes and schools, in order to understand how their attitudes were formed as English language learners and users of the language.

Ani.

In the previous section, I narrated the story of Azura, schooled in the 1980s, for whom English was foreign in her home and neighborhood. In the case of Ani, schooled about a decade later, things were slightly different, since she was born and brought up in Kuala Lumpur. However, things did not happen as differently as one might expect for someone coming from such a metropolitan city. For her, too, English did not become a mode of communication at home, even though she had two older siblings who had obtained very high grades in English in their secondary school exam and in the Malaysian University Entrance Examination (MUET). Her father worked for a pharmaceutical company and often communicated in English with his counterparts in Europe, and yet English never became a part of their communication at home; it was always Malay, their native language. From a young age, Ani watched Power Rangers, especially when it came with Malay subtitles. She watched English shows and listened to English songs, even though she was not always able to discern the lyrics. Yet, similar to Azura's experiences, English was still almost like a foreign language in her everyday life. Ani explained why it turned out this way: "We understand English but we don't use it maybe just because we find it weird, speaking with each other using a language which is not our mother tongue is weird...I don't speak English with my family. We watch English stuff. But when we speak to each other, we don't use English. So that's why for me speaking is really hard."

In the midst of such a home environment, the type of school that Ani attended also played a role in how English was positioned in her life. She attended Malay-medium schools for both her primary and secondary school education, for eleven years, and during this period she only had Malay students as classmates. According to her, most of the non-Malay students in her neighborhood went to the Chinese- and Tamil-vernacular schools, and as a result Ani's school was "*Malayanized*" in nature, as many Malaysians had started referring to it lately. She only had her first non-Malay classmate at the age of fifteen, a Chinese boy who had his primary education in a vernacular Chinese school. He was unable to speak fluently in both Malay and English; despite this, Ani and her friends insisted on speaking to him only in Malay. "In the end, he got better in his Malay," Ani laughed. Today, she wonders, "Why didn't I speak to him in English instead and improve in my English?" Thus, Ani's school was, for the most part, mono-ethnic and mono-lingual in nature, both in its student and teacher make-up. Thus for Ani, both her schools became extended locations for further usage of the Malay language.

Although Ani's urban schools were "*Malayanized*" in nature, they also had certain elements, at least in her primary school, that were similar to that of Azura. She, too, had students who turned out to be embodiments of English-elitism. Ani had five English-speaking students in her classroom; two of them were the sons of her English teachers. Another student was of Malaysian and American parentage and spoke with an American accent. All these elite students were rich, had good communication skills, particularly in English, and stood out in their leadership qualities. They always had more rapport with their teachers and were more preferred for participation in English-related activities. These high-class students always drew envy from all around. "Oh! Look at her! Look at her! She can speak English very well," some of the

students would remark among themselves with envy when they saw one of them walk confidently along the school corridors.

Fortunately for Ani, she was also elected as a school prefect alongside the elite students. This played a role in boosting her self-esteem when placed with them. This, on the other hand, had never taken place in the case of Azura, who felt most of the time that she was looked down on by the others in her RK Special Program classroom context. School prefects, in the Malaysian context, are outstanding students chosen by the school and the classroom teachers to assist them in maintaining order and in carrying out special tasks in the school on their behalf. Sometimes they were overworked with extra responsibilities; however it was a sign of status. They stood out from all the other students in their closer proximity with the teachers, and in the way they dressed differently from the others; some schools even provided them neckties and blazers. Currently, these prefects have become more noticeable than in the past, due to the leadership positions they often hold in student organizations and school level activities. This allowed Ani, too, to have a notion of elitism, just like the other elite English-speaking Malay students.

After entering secondary school, Ani did not want to be a school prefect anymore. However, in spite of her reluctance, she was still chosen by her teacher to be one. There was a major change in scenario in this secondary school; there were no more elite students, since most of them by now had left for the prestigious schools usually attended by English-speaking students like them. With the five elite students gone, Ani was now with students similar to her Malay-speaking background that only used English sparingly as required; however, since she was in the top from her group, she was often put in the limelight (more on this in Chapter 3).

This was also a time when a major shift occurred in the positioning of the English language in her schooling life. When Ani entered secondary school as a Form 1 student (age 13) in 2003, the government re-introduced the English language to teach math and science, after nearly three decades of its reduction. Under this new policy, known as PPSMI, for the first time Ani now had three subjects taught in English. This new policy was upheld for the next five years, throughout her entire secondary school education, before its abolishment following nationalists' sentiments. In spite of this newly created environment, by the end of her secondary school, English still did not become a means of communication for her; however, it did lead to a gradual change in how she perceived the English language. Ani began to acquire a positive attitude towards English, especially after the prominence she was receiving in the school. She continued being a school prefect and teachers called her to take part in English-related school activities, particularly during the "English Week" programs that the school organized. On a few occasions, she even gave short speeches in English during the school assembly. In the past, in her primary school, only the five elite Malay students were considered for such things. This renewed attitude towards the English language and her gradually growing confidence, however, did not go beyond her participation in such activities. With her friends and English teachers in the classroom, she continued speaking in Malay.

Hearing Azura and Ani's experiences with the elite students in their schools, and their perceptions and attitudes towards them and the learning of English, I wondered what it would feel like to be someone in the elite category. In the last year of my primary school, in the seventies, I remember a time when Umi (pseudonym), a new student of Malay nationality, walked into my classroom. This tall and slim girl looked Malay, but looking back now, she might have been of mixed parentage. She came from a prestigious school and was only in my class for

a short period. During this time, I quickly realized how different she was from the rest of us. Everyone looked at her with awe. Like all of us, she was also twelve years old, and yet we saw her exuberating so much confidence and poise as she walked around speaking fluently in perfect English, as though it was the only language she used at home. By then, most of us, especially those from the rural area, had already acquired a fair bit of proficiency in the language and could shine in our written work, but we still did not speak with such fluency. Today, as I think back of my school narratives in the 1970s, in relation to Azura and Ani's schooling in the 1980s and 1990s, I could not help marveling at some of the similarities found in our stories.

In the next section, I shift this exploration of English language experiences to that of Sarah, also from Kuala Lumpur like Ani, someone who would be considered as an elite student in the Malaysian context. What was the nature of her experiences, from the other side of the fence?

Sarah.

Even though Malaysia saw the last of the British almost half a century ago, some fragments of colonial rule remained through what I like to call as the elite schools in Malaysia. These were the schools that were once the iconic symbol of British imperialism. Today, these former English-medium schools have all been transformed into Malay-medium schools, but their old names have been retained. Currently there are 462 missionary schools, 227 in Peninsular Malaysia and 235 in East- Malaysia (Oon & Hock, 2008).

In this study, I have attributed to these mission schools a notion of elitism that I see is absent in the other regular public schools. Most of them are still run in grandeur colonial buildings with their former names still intact. An onlooker in Malaysia, today, will be baffled

with the English-speaking environment that has prevailed in these institutions in spite of the aggressive national educational policies that have sought to diminish its importance, beginning from the 1970s. Most of the students here came from royal families and affluent homes, and with parents who were professionals. Many of these students later became key players in the nation, contributing further to the elite nature of these schools. The first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was a famous alumni of Penang Free School, the first English school in the then Malaya. Najib Razak, the current Prime Minister of Malaysia, Nazrin Shah, the King of the Malaysian state known as Perak (see Figure 2.1), King Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, and S. Rajaratnam, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, were all former students of St John's Institution in Kuala Lumpur. Ananda Krishnan, the second richest man in Malaysia, and Francis Yeoh, ranked as one of Asia's most powerful and influential business entrepreneurs, were from Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁰ These are but a few examples to indicate how the distinguished nature of these former English-medium schools did not diminish over the years, even five decades after independence. Sarah was a student in such an elite primary school, which was in fact a continuation of the English-speaking environment that she had at home since birth.

From the very beginning, English was a common language in Sarah's household, unlike the two Malay participants presented thus far, Azura and Ani. Her extended family had various linguistic repertoires that extended from a few different languages: Indian languages that included Singhalese, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu; English; Malay; and Cantonese, a Chinese dialect. Even her parents, who were professionals, came from two different Indian-language

¹⁰ Lee Wei Lian, The tragic tale of Malaysian education. *The Malaysian Insider*. January 27, 2010. <http://www.ytlcommunity.com/beta/juli/commnews/shownews.asp?newsid=51278&category=top> Accessed 13 March 2014.

backgrounds. In such an environment, eventually English became a common language, especially since her grandparents on both sides could speak English, and one of them was even an English teacher. “I guess I was lucky that my grandparents could speak English,” Sarah remarked during one of my conversations with her in the university campus. “For some people in Malaysia, their grandparents spoke their native language. In that way I was lucky.” Thus, Sarah became the second generation in her family circle to grow up speaking only English and to accept it as her main language. I show later how in her life, English played an even greater role than Malay, the national language.

Before entering an elite school, Sarah’s primary education had in fact begun in a Chinese kindergarten. She was here for a year, before studying for a few months in a Chinese vernacular school in Penang, where she lived with her grandparents for a while. Her introduction to the elite school began after this slightly more than a year of exposure to the Chinese language. Today, she says that she does not remember anything at all from those schools, except perhaps the Dragonfly dance that she once did at that time. When I asked Sarah if she knew the reasons behind her parents’ choice of a Chinese school, she said, “It was close to where we lived. Maybe they thought that I should learn a different language instead of learning Tamil.” Was there a Tamil school in her area at that time? Sarah was not sure. “Probably my mom wouldn’t want me to go (even if there was),” she said. When queried further if this choice could be due to the general perception of the Indian community of the low educational quality in the Tamil schools, she said, “Maybe. I think she was more worried about the people. She was scared that... you know the (Indian) stereotypes that exist. I think she preferred me to go... I think maybe they thought going to Chinese school will be beneficial in the future.”

Thus, for Sarah, her home background provided her a setting different from the earlier students. This different setting shaped Sarah's later English-language learning experiences in schools. For her, learning had already started at home, since she was already reading fluently even before starting school. She was always surrounded by books, including a set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Weekends were fun-filled 'game-days' when everyone, including her grandparents, gathered in her parents' house for board games and language game sessions, everything to be conducted in English, the common language for all of them who came from various Indian language-speaking backgrounds. Coming from such a home background, surrounded only by English, not surprisingly Sarah spoke predominantly in English in her prestigious mission school. Just like in all the other Malay-medium schools throughout Malaysia, Malay was equally important in this school, due to its status as the national language; however, it was only used as necessary. Her mostly Chinese friends also came from similar backgrounds like her, and all the teachers in the school spoke English. Thus, throughout Sarah's schooling life, the Malay language only played a major role in the classrooms during content area studies, while the English language dominated all other areas of school communication and activities.

At the end of her six years of primary education in this elite school, Sarah's parents attempted to send her to a secondary school of similar prestige: however, due to issues related to school zones, she had to attend instead what she called a "middle-class" school, or a regular Malay-medium school. She was here for the next five years, studying with students who had their early education in vernacular Chinese- and Tamil schools. This transition to a regular school was not easy for Sarah. "When I was in my previous school, I was pretty much same like the other students. When I went to this new school, I kind of noticed that I was one of the better students," she said. Thus, Sarah was always put in the top classes with other students of similar

academic standing, while the lower classes had students from lower socio-economic conditions, not as good academically, and mostly spoke in the Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages. Such a division enabled Sarah to continue her socializing with the high achievers in the top classes, who, according to her, were mostly Chinese students. Occasionally, certain situations might necessitate her to have some interactions with the lower classes, but this would usually be for short periods of time. Eventually, she always got back to her own group of friends in the top classes, speaking the English language.

Thus, in spite of the environmental changes that happened in her secondary school, Sarah continued to have a suitable environment for her continual usage of English. Her earlier active participation in school activities continued. In this regular school, she continued as a school prefect. She also participated actively in inter-school debates, and in scrabble and choral-speaking competitions. She was also elected as the sub-editor for the school magazine. I wondered if Sarah chose to volunteer for all these school activities that often kept her in the school long after her formal classes were over. On the contrary, she said, “I never volunteered for anything. I didn’t choose to get involved. I get called. I don’t know, maybe my face says I can do it!” How were her English language learning experiences in this secondary school that did not have the English-speaking environment as in her previous prestigious primary school? “The intensity was just not there,” she said. She said this school was just a place for her to be, a place where she would sometimes “switch off” from the lessons because they were too simple. This school, unlike her previous one, did not even provide her with the type of English books she liked to read. She often glanced at the book shelves in the school library, and having read everything or not finding what she liked, eventually she resorted to renting books from a mall that had opened up near her house. Thus, most of Sarah’s learning took place at home.

I was curious to know more about Sarah's interactions with the other Indian students in her secondary school, who were mostly educated in vernacular Tamil schools. She said that sometimes some of the girls tried talking to her, particularly after finding out that she had relatives who were top Tamil deejays in the country, who were top hits among the younger generation. Those girls often talked to her in Tamil, to which she often responded with "I don't know! I don't understand!" in either Malay or English. Shocked, the Indian girls then asked in Malay, "*Tapi you India kan?*" ("But you are Indian, right?"). After a while, Sarah found the perfect way to get off the hook by not having to say anything more. She began to say, "*Taklah! Campur campur!*" ("No, I am mixed!"). She continued, "Even if I understand a little bit Tamil, I think it is best to say *tak faham* (I don't understand) before they go on."

Thus far, looking at Sarah's home and school experiences, it is clear how English played a dominant role in all aspects of her life, more than any of her multiple native languages, or even Malay, the national language. To a Malaysian bystander, her family background, association with the elite school that she attended, and the way she carried herself with an American accent now after years of exposure in the U.S., she exuberates a type of elitism. This is similar in nature to what Azura, the Malay participant, saw in her classmates in her prestigious residential schools, and what Ani also saw in her five modern, English-speaking Malay classmates. In Malaysian society, such attributes among students stand out immediately, because this group of people are outnumbered by the thousands more who attend regular schools.

In the next section, I explore the stories narrated by Jay, whose schooling experiences took her first to a vernacular Chinese school, and later to an elite mission school in Sabah, East Malaysia.

Stories from Sabah

When Jay was growing up in Sabah, the main language spoken at home was Malay, even though her native languages through both her parents were Chinese and Kadazan. This North Borneo state of Sabah had joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, along with Sarawak and Singapore, three years after the then Malaya had achieved independence from the British. Since then, the Malay language became part of the linguistic repertoire in the state. It was thus common for children in Jay's community to grow up speaking Malay, but along with that, many of them also attended Chinese vernacular schools to maintain a part of their identity.

This was Jay's background too. She attended a Chinese vernacular school that was mostly attended by Kadazan and Sino-Kadazan students, but was surrounded only by Malay, the national language. The focus of her school, like most other Chinese schools were on "critical subjects" such as Chinese language, math, and science, thus English language always took a backseat. Upholding discipline and acquiring as much academic knowledge as possible were the primary goals of these schools. According to Jay, play time was at a minimum level. "I heard stories that during recess, little kids play. We couldn't play! We couldn't run! There were so many kids there. No space. We have a field but that field was untouched. We couldn't go on that field. It was basically like a military compound where daily school chores must be completed" she said. Jay was also quick to add, "But it also made me appreciate things better, I think. I didn't take things for granted."

Jay remembered how her school was also one that invoked a lot of fear in her. "When I was younger, going to that Chinese school ... every day I woke up with fear in my heart. Every day! I am not kidding! I would actually be very, very nervous going to school," she remarked.

She recalled having the constant nagging fear within her that somebody would hit her that day in school with a *rotan* (cane), for forgetting to complete her homework. “What happens is, if you don’t do well in class, if you forgot to do your homework, and there is always tons of it, you get punished. There is always the *rotan*. I think it was very, very hard time for me. It was very hard childhood for me... The reason why I think I did better, why I tried to work harder is because of the fear of being punished,” she added. “It was school, eat, and then go back. The focus was only on academic work. It was crazy.” School began at 7:30 a.m., but she often left her house in the school bus at 6:30, and did not get back home until probably 4:00 or 4:30 in the evening because of extra classes that followed immediately after the regular school session.

Thus, Jay’s overall primary school experiences created a good student, but generally a subservient one shaped for academic excellence in critical subjects such as math and science. This notion took a different shape at the secondary school level, particularly when it came to English language education. In both her primary and secondary schools, English was taught as a single subject. In the former, however, a lot of fear was incited in her for the “fierce” teachers that taught the lessons. One particular experience that she had with one of these teachers had a very lasting negative impact on her learning of English (more on this will be explored in Chapter 3 on classroom experiences). This was a time when Jay’s hatred for her English teachers also became directed towards the subject as a whole. English was not a language used for communication at home, nor was it used frequently in her community. Thus, English lessons were hard for her, and she constantly had problems in understanding certain grammatical rules that in her mind were simpler in the Malay language. This situation changed at the end of primary school at the age of thirteen, when she entered a secondary school. This school, like the

one attended by Sarah, the Indian student, for the first six years of her schooling, was of an elite nature. This was where Jay's subsequent positive associations with the subject took place.

Jay's nineteenth century Catholic mission school is one of the best in the state, and it had produced a great many movers and shakers at the national level. Just like the other mission schools in Malaysia, it had continued with its rich English-language tradition even though the medium of instruction was in Malay. When Jay stepped into this school, it surprised her to hear more English used here than what she had experienced in her previous vernacular Chinese school that mostly had a Kadazan identity. "We used a lot more English there. Every time after school assembly, we had prayers in English. I think our anthem was in English too," said Jay. Initially, learning English posed a lot of problems for her. She always had to write Chinese characters above all the difficult English words in her texts for almost a year before eventually becoming proficient in the language. Since this mission school was a transition for her from a Chinese to Malay-medium school, she had to do the same for the Malay language as well. Eventually, she picked up more English and Malay than in her primary school. Later, she found that in the process of acquiring more proficiency in these two subjects, some of her knowledge in the Chinese language was lost. Jay had more to say in this area, but this will be dealt with later in Chapter 4.

In recalling her English-language learning experiences, Jay also noted the different culture that existed in this mission school. She saw the school forcing students to engage in more reading through a systemic change. This school ran as two sessions; due to the lack of classrooms, students in the upper grades studied in the morning from 7:30 until 12:40, after which the younger students began theirs in the afternoon session. During this interim period

between the two sessions, the school gathered all the younger students from the afternoon session in the large school hall. They were made to line up according to their classes, and then all of them sat cross-legged on the floor and simply read anything they liked, school textbooks if they have exams, or storybooks. This forced context became important in Jay's schooling life because eventually it shaped her to be an avid reader. For the first time, she particularly began to enjoy English language story books beginning with the Goosebumps series. Even though English was a subject that she had hated in the past, now it slowly took shape as an important component in her life especially with being located in a former English-medium school that had retained many of its former identities. Over the years, Jay acquired more proficiency and was able to communicate in English with her teachers and the other students.

At this time in her secondary school, Jay recalled some the inter-school English competitions where she had to represent her school. During such events, she often came face-to-face with the other competitors who had lived in the cities for the most part of their lives and were fluent English speakers. At times like that, even though she was already a student in an elite school herself, Jay often reflected on her previous experiences in primary school when she was a struggling English learner. She often reminisced on what it felt like to be intimidated because of her low English language proficiency. Such was the nature of the experiences that Jay underwent, from being a vernacular student with limited English language who had also hated the subject, to becoming a person with a more positive attitude towards the language but who also always remembered what it was like before attaining the present state.

Discussion

All the students' experiences narrated above, based on their home and school backgrounds, indicate how their attitudes and perceptions towards the English language, as learners and users of the language, had taken shape differently. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, schools are important sites where new identities are acquired or resisted, and where prior identities are re-affirmed or undergo transformation. The identity of the schools play a huge role in this aspect. In this section, I now look across all the students' narrated experiences to see how these processes had occurred, placing them alongside the national narratives, in order to find out the social significance of these processes. In doing this, I seek to gain deeper understanding about how these processes took shape and impacted students' learning of English and their identities differently.

Identity Creations

The nationalizing process that began in Malaysia from the 1950s, the decade leading to its independence, played a major role in the deconstruction of the identities of the various schools through various educational policies; thus some became more focused on adapting a Malay identity, while a few like the mission schools retained their English language identity. How students positioned or reacted to the presence of the English language in their school lives was greatly dependent on the inclination of the schools as well.

The regular Malay-medium primary and secondary schools, labeled as "Malayanized schools," had a highly reduced English language environment compared to the mission schools and residential schools, as can be inferred from the students' narrations above. According to

Samuel Yesuiah (2014), these schools are currently attended by 95% Malays, with a “sprinkling” of Indians and Chinese.¹¹ The government’s Malay nationalist policies from the 1970s also created a generation of teachers in the national schools with low English language proficiency. Some of them eventually became English teachers, to the dismay of some parents and academicians. Thus, this is one factor that could impact the kind of attitude that is brought into the schools in the teaching of the English language, and with the possibility of it being passed on to the students.

This is the type of school that was attended by both the Malay students; Ani, for eleven years, and Azura, for the first six years of her primary schooling before she obtained a scholarship to enter an elite residential school. In these schools, depending on the particular teachers’ attitudes and perceptions towards the language, students’ objectives in acquiring the language could be for communicative purposes or to sail through yet another academic subject. Azura and Ani’s journeys in their regular public schools were only tampered with the entrance of elite English-speaking students, who portrayed an entirely different world that they soon began to adore. This was the time when their initial resistance and indifference towards English underwent transformation to enable them to be part of a system that for them embodied recognition and social class. Compared to these national schools that portrayed students as having a particular kind of identity with low English proficiency, the mission schools gave its students a more positive identification towards the language. Thus, Sarah and Jay were able to acquire a more positive attitude in the use of English through their association with the elite

¹¹ Samuel Yesuiah. Schools must reflect racial mix. *The Star*. StarEducate. Sunday 30 March 2014.

schools, even though they attended them only for five years of their schooling life. On the other hand, it was a harder task for Azura and Ani.

Apart from students' home backgrounds and schools, teachers and certain school policies also play a major role in affecting students' identities as learners and users of the language. Some schools and teachers, within the strict curricular demands of the state, often plan and execute aggressive English-based language activities, compared to other schools. Special days and weeks are allocated where opportunities are created for students to communicate in the language. Some schools carry out such policies more than what is expected of them, with the objectives to improve students' communication skills, and to create a positive and non-threatening environment for them to use the language. Ani had more of these activities in her school that created a lot of opportunities for her to speak in English, despite not using the language much anywhere else. Such school-based policies, and PPSMI that was created at the national level for teaching math and science in English, are some of the factors that played a role in impacting these students' attitudes towards the language.

Some of these policies that played a gradual role in transforming students' identities, did not always bring about the desired effects, as it happened in my primary school in the early 1970s. At that time, for a short period, my school forced its students to speak only in Malay language every Friday. This was during the years when all the English-medium schools in Malaysia had been nationalized but three subjects still remained in English. Thus, we, the students, had continued using our home languages and English. We only spoke Malay language as necessary, usually this will be during our Malay lesson. With the new policy in place, failure to speak in Malay on Fridays led us to pay a small fine. School prefects walked along the school

corridors with their little notebooks trying to “catch” those who spoke in English or in their vernacular languages. Did the imposition of this policy make everyone speak in Malay as desired by the school (and now I think, the nation as a whole)? Far from it, I do not remember a single day when the policy created moments where we conversed in Malay voluntarily.

Our strict school system, thus, was unable to force us to change our attitudes and speak in a tongue that it so desired. Probably this was also the factor involved in the case of Azura and Ani, when at a particular point in their lives they were encouraged to speak in English, a language that was nothing more than a foreign language in their lives, and a single subject learned in school. The impact of these policies, however, cannot be ignored, for as was seen in the case of Azura and Ani, they did bring about a transformation in their lives, even though it only happened gradually after lots of resistance. Some of these changes in the students’ lives were not apparent immediately in their actions when they were in school, but they only became apparent at the tertiary level. Thus, the importance of school policies in the study of students’ formation of identities, cannot be undermined.

Most of the parents in Malaysia now, more educated than in the past, have gradually understood the different roles that certain types of schools play in constructing certain types of attitudes and identities in their children. This effect is currently showing in the enrollment patterns in the Malaysian schools.

Social Mobility

An understanding of school structures, policies, and the types of teachers who teach has caused a transformation in the way education is perceived at the larger societal level. There was a

time in Malaysia when working class parents restricted their children's education to the closest public schools in their neighborhood that taught a nationalist curriculum. Today's parents, by contrast, are more educated than in the past and have begun to undertake newer and more expensive quests to prepare their children for a globalized world, that they assume will mostly communicate in English. These differing stances and preferences are currently taking place because of the international value that they assign to the English language. Thus, children are put in particular schools that will give them certain identities in preparation for the future, to enable them to participate successfully at the local and international levels. This trend is currently seen in the choice of schools that will expose children to more English language.

Parents' desire for particular schools for their children is clearly a means to provide them with the type of identity they wish them to have. Choosing schools in this manner is synonymous to choosing the kind of environment that they like to impose upon their children. All the public schools in Malaysia, both national and vernacular schools, teach Malay as a compulsory subject. As a component of the nation's public schools, the residential-and elite-schools also teach the Malay language, however, the difference is in the kind of culture that exists in the school in terms of the language (s) predominantly used for general communication, and particularly in the language (s) used by the teachers, in and outside the classrooms.

There is now a trend among some Malaysians who are now rejecting the regular public schools that they feel have become more Malayvanized. These schools have acquired a particular image; they are mostly attended by Malay students, taught by a majority of Malay teachers, and have little or hardly any English usage. In these schools, English language is confined to classroom teaching and the minimal English-related school activities. The mission schools and

residential schools, on the other hand, even though they are government-funded public schools, conduct themselves differently by maintaining an English-speaking environment, as was evident in the accounts provided by Sarah and Jay.

Some reports show how this rejection is increasingly becoming evident in the way school enrollment is structured. By 2002, there were reports of some 7000 Chinese Malaysians attending English-medium schools in Singapore (Tan, 2005, p. 58). Apart from this, there is also an increase in interest in Chinese language education. Ridge (2004, p. 409) reported that in April 1995, there were 35,000 Malay and Indian students in the Chinese-medium schools. This is an increase of 2,000 students in just one year. Of this number, 25,000 were Malays, and the rest were Indian students. A decade earlier, there were fewer than 8,000 non-Chinese in these schools. By 1999, this population had jumped to 40,000.¹² Such instances show how some of the centralized policies that are put in place might have different repercussions at the ground level. At this level, some languages are downplayed or given lesser importance than others for the sake of economic gains, and schools are important sites where such preferences are shown.

Another way in which major transformation of identities among students occur is in the increasing realization among them that English language proficiency is a sign of elitism, and that it enhances one's social visibility in particular contexts. Azura and Ani's interactions with the English-speaking elite students might be limited, but they noted with awe how those students' English language proficiency and good communication skills went hand-in-hand with their poise, confidence, and leadership qualities. They also noted how such attributes made them stand out

¹² Ridge, B. (2004). Bahasa Malaysia and recent Malaysian English Language policies. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 5(4). p. 407-423.

from the rest in the school. Seoyeon Choi (2010) has noted how such mannerisms are symbolic of people's high social status and sophisticated mannerisms. When students aspire to acquire such new qualities that were not inherent in them in the past, it requires a major transformation in their identities. Sometimes, this process of constructing and reconstructing identities might take years to occur. Thus, Azura's location in her *kampung* was not conducive for her to acquire English, even though she studied the subject for six years in her primary school. In the case of Ani, located in Kuala Lumpur, the evolving metropolis city, it could have been easier however, in her case it was not. Unlike Azura, in whose life English did not exist at all at home, in the case of Ani, it did exist to a certain extent in the form of social media. The lack of acceptance of the language, in Ani's case, was related to her home background, how English language was perceived, and what type of attitudes she grew up with.

In the presence of elite students, in the likes of those such as Sarah and Jay, eventually Azura and Ani were made to realize that proficiency in the English language is synonymous with social status. This gradual attitude change in Azura and Ani was interestingly also enhanced by the condescending looks and glances thrown upon them by the elite others, and by the manner in which, when among them, the spoken language was immediately switched to Malay. Such instances of *Othering* is often the root cause of the divide between the urban and rural students, English language speakers- and non-speakers, and socio-economic status. While schools and the players within them play a role in acquiring and refining certain language identities, in these cases of *Othering*, sometimes certain identities can also be forcefully accorded by merely denying them in-group memberships.

Conclusion

Sarah and Jay, the Indian and Sino-Kadazan students, will be considered to have a higher social status in Malaysia for various reasons. The manner in which they conduct themselves, their English language speaking backgrounds, their overseas education, and their eventual speaking with a non-Malaysian accent are some of the factors that will eventually lead to this. These students, may or may not consider themselves to possess such attributes related to social class, however, such are the identities that will be accorded to them on a day-to-day basis.

In this chapter, after looking at how Malaysian students' perceptions and attitudes towards the English language were shaped by their diverse home backgrounds and the type of schools they attended, the next question that arises is how these attitude changes were further shaped and transformed at the micro level in their classroom environments, and how these changes went on to impact their identities further as English language learners. The next chapter is an exploration of this issue.

CHAPTER THREE

Classrooms and Identity Formation

Classroom narratives are important aspects of learning that need to be studied and analyzed, especially those that involve students' stories about their learning. Sometimes these stories are ignored and brushed aside as issues of lesser importance. However, every now and then a closer introspection might reveal their significance in showing insightful understandings. Since I got involved in narrative research, I started to reflect on some of the classroom narratives that I had encountered in the past in Malaysia, in order to gain more understanding at a deeper level. By doing this, I also started to bring those understandings to bear upon my current thinking. This renewed interest is because of my recent discovery of my naivety in brushing aside certain happenings in the past that now have risen to show their significance.

One such event happened in the 1980s, in a small and quiet rural area in the state of Negeri Sembilan. This was in a secondary school that was attended by students who had their primary education in Chinese- and Tamil- vernacular schools. The students entered this school at the age of thirteen, after six years of exposure to vernacular languages in schools where Malay and English were taught as single subjects. Some of them also came from Malay-medium primary schools, where all the subjects were taught in Malay, with English as a single subject. Most of these students came from low socio-economic groups, from the *kampung* and the *estates* in the area, and they hardly spoke English at home. In such a situation, I was not surprised to see the students' preference to speak in their own languages since I did the same thing as a student in my primary and secondary schools. But of course, now, as a teacher, I was unhappy with the situation.

One day, I decided to do something about this, so I restricted my Form Four students (aged sixteen) from using any other languages apart from English during my lessons. My year-long teaching experience at that time did not prepare me for what followed next. After my brief announcement, my usually talkative class immediately turned dead silent. I took it as a good sign, thinking that now more learning could take place. At that time, Norhayati, one of the Malay students in my class, who could not be silenced for too long, said something in English to her friend sitting nearby. A Malay boy, who was also sitting close to her, immediately gave her a quick glance and said, “*Amboi! Action nya!*” (“Oh! What a show off!”). After that day, Norhayati did not voluntarily speak in English again, unless asked to do so. At that time, I did not do anything about it due to my preoccupation to finish “covering” the topics prescribed by the Ministry of Education. These topics must be covered in a timely fashion so that the English teacher who will take over from me the following year, will be able to guide the students for their important national examination.

At that time, I ignored this seemingly simple event in my class, but today I wonder if I should have asked and dug for more stories from them to understand what actually took place that day. Norhayati’s silence and the other student’s ridicule could have been the beginning in understanding some of my students from the rural area. These are the kinds of classroom narrations that I now believe have pedagogical possibilities especially when students’ perspectives are juxtaposed with that of the predominant narratives that are taking place at the societal level. The ridiculing and the eventual silencing could possibly have been the result of a larger phenomenon taking place in the community. Norhayati was probably responding in a manner that was beyond her grasp. This is, thus, an important phenomenon that I now think needs to be understood in order to help those students. Pushing it under the rug only enhances

and reaffirms certain negative perceptions and attitudes towards a group of students that might possibly affect the overall teaching and learning of English.

In this chapter, I have tried to unravel more stories from my student participants, particularly those relating to their learning of English in their classrooms. I have begun by first presenting the classroom experiences narrated by Azura and Ani, followed by Sarah and Jay.

Classroom Narratives

Azura

Azura's classroom setting in both her primary and secondary schools did not give her sufficient English language competency that would help her later in her out-of-school encounters. It was not even sufficient for her to use it confidently during her tertiary years in a government-sponsored institution in Kuala Lumpur.

Azura's overall classroom experiences were grammar-based, with the main objective being to pass examinations, as determined by the school culture. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in her *kampung* school she got very little exposure to English, and in fact some of her lessons were conducted in Malay. Things changed in secondary school, when as a Form 4 student (aged sixteen) she got a new "fierce" Chinese teacher who insisted that only English should be spoken in the classroom. She had very high expectations of her students, and thus their incomplete work was always punished physically. Azura said, "In class, the teacher called every person to answer individually. So I counted the question number that will be mine to answer, to make sure that I have the answer for that. So that I don't have to stand, but usually I have to stand. The teacher didn't care even if you are good in other subjects. And usually if I couldn't finish the homework, I just borrowed someone's work because ...so scared of her."

Thus, Azura's classroom English learning at this time was infused with fear, and her grammar-based lessons were predominantly exam-oriented. "We did a lot of grammar but still I didn't understand why we used this. Students errors would be marked as wrong in red ink but the teacher never really explained why it must be changed!" said Azura. Most of her thinking will be in Malay before it is translated into English. She added further, "Sometimes you know, we want to say something but just so scared of what if we make mistakes? What if we say something wrong? Then what people will think? We know nobody will laugh but we were so conscious if we say something wrongly, if we were not supposed to say in a particular way." At this time, even though Azura achieved high grades in English, mostly by employing memorization techniques, it did not necessarily lead her to high proficiency, particularly in the area of oral communication. However, among the rural students who attended the residential school that she attended for five years in the town, she was considered the best among them. "You can make the benchmark. If I was the outstanding student at that time, imagine the other students!" By this time, when Azura was completing her secondary school, she was having a positive image of herself as a student because of her excellence among her group of friends from the rural area. However, she was not satisfied with this because she had begun to compare herself to the English-speaking elite Malay students.

Did she even like to learn English language, I wondered? "I liked being in the English class but just maybe scared of the teacher." This was the time when Azura, for the first time, came up with the idea of hiding in the girls' toilet in the school rather than sitting in the class with incomplete English homework and undergoing punishment. She said she did this only for English lessons even though she didn't really care about her results in the subject. It was her fear of her English teacher that prompted her to take such measures. The space in the girls' toilet was

very narrow, and yet she chose to hide there on a few occasions. A few times, some of her friends also stood with her in the cramped place. According to Azura, her teacher never came looking for her, she thinks probably it was because of lack of time. Thus, this is what she did to skip her English lessons in secondary school, but if it was for an entire day of schooling, she simply hid in her dorm locker. Her dorm was located just adjacent to her school. Unlike her classroom teacher, who did not come searching for her, here it was different; the dorm warden was always able to find her and pull her out.

In her final year of secondary school, after Azura was awarded a tentative scholarship to study for her undergraduate degree in the U.S., she was forced to look for ways to increase her English language competency. This overseas program would only begin after she had completed her two-year matriculation program in a college in Malaysia. One of the government requirements for this was that students should have obtained good grades in *SPM* English, the final secondary school exit examination. Azura had heard stories of four or five of her seniors who did their matriculation program using their trial exam in school but were denied a place when the SPM results obtained for English were lower than expected. “They didn’t get credit in English. I mean the sponsor just abandoned them like that,” said Azura. This realization of losing a great opportunity to study in the U.S. caused a transformation in Azura’s thinking towards acquiring English language proficiency through her class work. Luckily, she obtained a credit that was just sufficient to be selected for the program, and thus she was able to begin her next two-year journey in the college in Kuala Lumpur.

Thus at this stage, Azura had reconstructed her identity, but it was only to enable her to obtain enough grades in English for her U.S. education. This positive attitude enabled her to

achieve success however, with her still being in doubt about her language skills. When I suggested that I did not see a problem in her spoken English, she quickly added, “No, I still use broken English, you know, in grammar. I used to do my thinking in Malay then translate to English. Sometimes, I feel, even until now, that I still make mistakes. And I feel that sometimes I am too conscious even while I am talking. I still correct myself and repeat my sentences.”

Azura’s further narratives indicated that such thoughts never left her, even while attending classes at the tertiary level. Here, for the first time, she yearned to acquire communication skills and not merely to pick up study techniques to get good grades in her English. Just as it was in her residential schools, here too, she encountered secondary school students who came from throughout the country, some of them with good English language proficiency, and thus, her earlier concerns about her proficiency level continued. However, her lecturers in this college were mostly Americans; thus, she had to transform herself quickly to adapt to this new environment as soon as possible in order to be a successful student. According to Azura, adapting was not easy. This college gave all the students a placement test, after which students were categorized into thirty groups, with about fifteen students in each. Azura was put in the last group that had many students who lacked sufficient English language skills. She always moved with these students. She said, “You always mix with people who are in the same place like you. So I tend to make friends with people who came from *kampung*. Also, so we were *kampung* girls, not like them,” said Azura. “So how can my English get better?” she added.

Thus, on one side, Azura was hearing more English now, especially with American lecturers; however, due to her perceptions on what others would think about her usage, and her inability to use the language comfortably, gaining English proficiency was still problematic for Azura. I was curious to know what her classroom experiences were in this institution, especially

since she was mostly taught by American lecturers. “We had the same students who always did the talking. We (the rural students) kept quiet and gradually the lecturers knew. Only sometimes we talked. Sometimes, some lecturers wanted every person to talk so they called our names so that not the same people talked and answered questions,” she said. According to Azura, in her case, she only responded when she was called to add on to some others’ views.” I remember that I never gave new ideas. Never,” she added. According to her, it was obvious that American lecturers preferred students who participated; thus, the elite students were the ones who always stood out, since they talked and gave ideas all the time in the classrooms, while the others like her often kept quiet unless asked to say something. Azura was able to perceive this very quickly because she had seen the lecturers easily remembering their names and saying “Hi” to them, and talking to them all the time in the hallways.

Azura tried to explain her lack of usage of the language: “You don’t want your people to think bad of you. People will think you are showing off. You don’t want to do that, things that people don’t like.” She lacked the language structures, and at the same time she was also worried about what her better classmates would think of her usage. “I just took some classes to fulfill the course requirements,” Azura mentioned. However, at the same time, she also said how she became more aware of the importance of participating in the class, since five percent of the grades were awarded for participation. This realization made her yearn to increase her English language proficiency.

This newly acquired sense of confidence also led her to look at the other group of students differently. “Those students who think that they are better than us... it is only in terms of English. Just one subject but they think that they are better. ..They don’t know that they still have a long way to go. We are not going to U.S. to do English. We are going to do different

majors. There are even some people who didn't pass their preparation program (in Malaysia) and were expelled, and they went to local university instead. Still, they did get a good job at the local university because they are smart students. English was their only problem," explained Azura at great length. She was quick to add how in her preparation program, the elite students acted as though they owned the institution. "Just because they know English better than us... They might be more confident but gradually after coming here they knew the difference after getting into their own major. Even people who are bad in their English, later they can be much better than them. So that's why, I know that English is important in your life but that's not the only thing."

Today, in the U.S. setting, Azura has become a confident speaker, as I saw during my interviews with her. She still struggles with some of her language structures, but nonetheless she is able to deliver her thoughts without hesitating. She had also completed many of her doctoral level classes successfully. Thus, even though she had shown initial struggles in the Malaysian context, after many years of being in the U.S., first as an undergraduate student and now as a doctoral student, she had acquired more fluency and now has a positive attitude about the language.

Looking at the above stories narrated by Azura, we can be seen how her attitudes, and in the process her identity as an English-language learner, were transformed by all her classroom experiences. The experiences of Ani, the second Malay participant, began in a similar manner, but she took a different course to achieve her objectives.

Ani

What were the circumstances that led to Ani's initial resistance and refusal to speak? Her narratives regarding her English teachers and classmates provide some clues to understanding this.

Ani recounted a day as an eleven-year old in her primary school when her strict English teacher, Mrs. Lina, walked into her classroom in her red traditional *baju kurung*, a handbag dangling on one shoulder, and her books held against her chest. This particular day stood out for Ani, even to the extent of being able to describe her teacher, because of a surprising announcement that she made. That day, without providing any explanation, her teacher announced her new rule that everyone in the class should only converse in English. Hearing about this day from Ani's schooling days, I was immediately transported to another day in the past when as a teacher I had imposed a similar rule and ended up silencing my whole class. According to Mrs. Lina, Ani's English teacher at that time, anyone caught using Malay, their native language, would be fined fifty *sen*. Ani, sitting behind a group of boys in the third row from the front, was surprised. An "English Day" was already in-place at the school level, so why the need for this sudden rule in the classroom? "Maybe the teachers suddenly realized during one of their staff meetings that it is important to speak in English," she thought. Maybe the "English Day" activities and their weekly ninety minutes of English lessons were not sufficient to promote English among the students. Soon after this announcement, everyone in the class got stressed, but obviously not the five English-speaking elite students.

In the past, Ani and her friends would ask for permission to go to the bathroom in Malay, but this new rule now made it harder. The school prefects sometimes needed to leave the class five minutes before recess in preparation for their assigned duties. This too became harder,

because it was a constant struggle for them to decide on the correct English words and sentence structures to use with Mrs. Lina. Sometimes Ani and her classmates would worry if the “correct” way to ask for permission should be “*Can I...?*” or “*May I...?*” Whispered consultations often took place in Malay behind Mrs. Lina’s back, and occasionally a person might gain the courage to try it, but often they simply refrained from going to the bathroom during Mrs. Lina’s lessons. Ani often remained silent rather than pay a fine for accidentally uttering a word in Malay. The fine was high; it was half of her daily “*duit belanja*,” her pocket money. “Even though it was only fifty *sen*, for me that was quite a lot. What am I going to eat during recess?” said Ani. Thus, during the whole time of the implementation of this rule, Ani only spoke after Mrs. Lina had left the classroom, but as expected, it was in her native Malay language.

Ani never had to pay a fine, but her talkative classmate Rozita was unlucky when one day, without thinking, she asked a friend loudly, “*Boleh tak pinjam pensel?*” (Can I borrow your pencil?). In an accusatory manner, the whole class said, “Ohhh!” They watched as she took heavy steps towards Mrs. Lina’s table to pay her fine. That day, Rozita was mad for losing her money and for being teased by everyone. A few days later, she became angrier still when once again she was caught using Malay and was teased by the whole class. This time she did not have enough money and was only able to pay the next day. Two weeks later, this rule died a natural death. Even without Mrs. Lina’s formal announcement, students knew it was over because their gradual usage of Malay went unnoticed. Ani, once again, was able to talk freely in Malay.

How did Ani feel at the prospects of learning math and science in English (*PPSMI*) when it was introduced for the first time at national level, also the year when she began her secondary education? This would have entailed many changes in her classroom learning. According to her,

she was overjoyed at the prospects of learning math and science in English because they were her two favorite subjects, and she could also improve her language skills. She had felt that this policy will be an “interesting” and a “good thing” to adopt; however, she also remembered how her Malay math and science teachers struggled to teach the content area in a language that had been reduced in their generation. According to her, they lacked the confidence and the proficiency level to teach her classes, in spite of the compulsory training the government was making them attend. Ani found it amusing at that time to see how her teachers also had to learn how to teach math and science in English. This system, unfortunately for Ani, was abolished at the end of her secondary education, just five years after its inception.

Thus, during Ani’s secondary school education, she did have more exposure to the English language, unlike in Azura’s case; however, her communication in the language was still very limited. At one level, she began to take part in more school-related English language activities, particularly during “English Day,” when as a school prefect she spoke during the school assemblies for a few minutes. She was always called on to participate, also because the few elite students in her previous classes were all gone. In spite of all this, Ani’s interactions with her classmates and teachers were still confined to Malay, exactly how it was at the primary school level. She even spoke in Malay to her favorite English teacher, who insisted that she switch to English in order to improve her language. Thus Ani’s positive attitude towards the English language had evolved in the secondary school, but it did not fully take shape until she began her next phase of life at the tertiary level.

After secondary school, Ani came to a private college in the south of Kuala Lumpur to attend a two-year government-funded preparation program, before continuing with her

undergraduate studies in the U.S. This was a program similar to the one attended by Azura in the capital city; however by now, almost a decade later, the government was already working in partnership with this particular private college in Malaysia. Compared to Azura's time when she had attended it, by now it had acquired a more international flavor, and thus more English was used. This was where Ani's identity took a major transformative leap; in her new classrooms now, not only did she begin to talk in English but she also began to do it widely, even with the elite students from multiethnic groups. This institution had more students from various ethnic groups, within and outside Malaysia. This forced more exposure to the English language, almost like how it was in the mission schools or residential schools in Malaysia. In such a setting, most of the students spoke predominantly in English, and Ani was forced to partake in it, gradually improving in her communication skills. She narrated how once she saw a few students, particularly the Chinese, reading a novel by Khaled Hosseini. When Ani saw this, she remembered thinking, "I have never read it. Why are you reading that? Why haven't I read that before?" From being a student who wondered in such a manner, later she would rise to be a student in a public-speaking class in college, a skill that eventually she also used in her university in the U.S.

Having looked at the classroom stories that indicated the eventual rise of Azura and Ani, the Malay student participants, as more successful learners and users of English language, which had taken place amidst various tensions in their surroundings, next I explore the classroom stories shared by Sarah and Jay.

Sarah

In Chapter 2, it was mentioned how Sarah came from an affluent home where English was the only language spoken. This situation was extended further throughout her schooling life, for the first six years in an elite mission school, and for the next five years in a regular school. In this regular school, her associations with other English-speaking students continued. Earlier, it was also mentioned how Sarah often “switched off” during her English lessons because they were never challenging enough. In this section, I continue this narration, to see how her identities were further shaped as a result of her learning in her classrooms and how they differed from those of Azura and Ani.

When asked about her classes, Sarah said, “Quite honestly, I wasn’t really paying attention in English class. I was kind of in my own world usually. I can put together beautiful sentences but I can’t do verb and noun, I can’t divide out into that. I can’t make sentences based on that structure. So whenever they do that, I just zone out.” Since Sarah loved reading story books, did she tune in more during her literature classes? Surprisingly, only a few texts prescribed by the national curriculum had given her such enjoyment. She said, “I only remember the one called ‘The Pearl.’ It was just a small one. I enjoyed this class better than the grammar class. I was paying more attention to see the underlying messages. That was interesting. Perhaps the thing that I remember the most is the discussion on the literature stuff. It wasn’t really a discussion but they (teachers) telling us what it is. They try to ask us but nobody will put up their hands and say anything.”

For Sarah, coming from such a background, her issues were not with English but with the other Malaysian languages that existed in her life. She had grown up with English as her first language; thus, when I asked her to recall some of her English learning experiences, her stories

were tied to the difficulties she had with Malay, the national language. Once, when Sarah was a primary school student, there was a reading competition at the school level, in both Malay and English. At that time, all the students were encouraged by the teachers to take part in this competition by reading as many storybooks as possible in Malay and in English. After reading, they were required to record in an exercise book the particular details from those books, such as the title of the book, the author's name, and summaries. Students who had read the most books for each category throughout the year would receive prizes. Sarah was an avid reader, since she was young and was already reading when she entered kindergarten. She decided to take part in this competition and began to read English books profusely with lots of enjoyment. Her recordings in the exercise book for English books were always "perfect." Sometimes she read so many English books and got so absorbed in them that she even forgot to record them.

During the interview, Sarah narrated how it was a completely different story when it came to reading for the Malay category. For this, she would go to the Malay section in the library, take out a stack of storybooks from the shelves, and copy the titles and the authors' names from the front covers. After that, she would flip to the last page of each book and quickly come up with the summaries to write down in her exercise book. In this way, Sarah would get all the information needed for the competition without reading any of those Malay books. Sarah said, "As long as they see (enough) number of books there, you are fine!" In this competition, once or twice Sarah had won in the English category; however, she laughed about how "once in a lifetime experience" she was awarded a prize in the Malay category as well! She said, "There is not a single Malay book that I remember reading in secondary school. There is one that I remember but I cannot remember the name. Maybe because I didn't appreciate the language as

much. For English, I like to see how the words are put together. They had good books like Nancy Drew, Sherlock Holmes. It was my kind of stories.”

Thus, compared to the English language learning experiences of Azura and Ani, in whose lives it hung almost like a backdrop, in Sarah’s life, it played a different role in her identity formation, particularly since family circumstances had accorded it a first language identity. In the next section, I describe some of Jay’s experiences in her classroom that began in a Chinese vernacular school and later extended to an elite mission school in Sabah.

Jay

One hot afternoon in her Form 2 English class (aged fourteen), Jay and her friends sat down and made plans for a wedding. Jamal, the protagonist in the short story they had just read, was going to get married, and their teacher had given them an interactive activity to do.¹³ According to Jay, Jamal, a Malay man in the eastern state of Kelantan in Peninsula Malaysia (See Figure 1.2), had said, “Oh! This wedding will take a lot of money.” And so he planned for all the cost-cutting measures he could think of, absentmindedly even selling his own Bally shoes that he wanted to wear on his wedding day. That day, Jay’s innovative English teacher had asked the class to come up with the bride’s name, since it was not mentioned in the story, to design the wedding card, and even to draw a pair of the shoes. This was not a typical lesson that Jay was used to having in her elite mission school, but on this particularly humid day, which she said will easily put the class to sleep, she appreciated the lesson very much.

¹³ Che Husna Azhari (1992). Of bunga telur & Bally shoes. *Kelantan Tales: An anthology of short stories*. Furada Publishing House.

Jay's English lessons in her previous Chinese vernacular school were not as appealing to her. She narrated a particular classroom event that happened when she was in Standard 3 (aged nine). This was a time when for two years in a row, Jay had a tall and thin, very fierce looking Chinese lady as her teacher, and the lesson that day was on tenses. Her primary school had seven classes for each grade level, and in this class, where Jay sat somewhere in the middle, there were about fifty students. On that day, her teacher called out the students' names according to the alphabetic order, and asked them to give the past tense form of certain words. Jay's number was six and the word that was given to her after the fifth person was "M-A-K-E. At that time, Jay was still not proficient in her English language, since she only spoke Malay at home, and in school, it was predominantly Chinese. Trying to think of the right answer, Jay noted that the other five students before her simply added the suffix "-ed" at the end of their words to transform them into the past tense form. Jay stood up and spelled her word "M-A-K-E-D." Her teacher immediately got so mad and screamed at her "Why don't you know the past tense for 'make?' It is not M-A-K-E-D. It is M-A-D-E!" Recalling this incident, Jay said, "At that time, I remember hating the teacher. I will never be good in it. I don't really know what was the purpose of learning it at that time. And the teacher was horrible because she was so mean. I mean at that time, people don't necessarily learn English at home. She just made people feel terrible and she was not good in teaching it. I still remember her voice."

To this day, Jay does not understand the reason behind her teacher's anger, since no explanation was given for her yelling. That was the day when Jay remembered she began to lose her interest in learning English. Feelings of dislike for the subject also began to build up in her. "I think that is how they teach too. They don't really show compassion to the students," she said. According to Jay, English was a subject that was always hard for her to "piece things together,"

or even to “make sense” of certain grammatical structures. “It made me not want to learn it because it was hard and I didn’t understand it at all. I would never be good in English,” she said. The Malay language, according to her, was not as hard because the words do not need to be changed to make them past tense. Only the time reference has to be used. It was the same way in Chinese too. “That concept didn’t make sense to me where you have to change something in order to indicate that it was in the past... I hated the subject because it did not make sense. It just did not make sense,” Jay continued, still remembering her teacher’s face after all these years, even what she sounded like, and how embarrassed she had felt that day.

Learning English in this Chinese school was different because there was a lot of memorization in preparation for the exam. Thus, if Jay was asked to compose a story in English, she was always given a set of pictures. She was taught to look at each picture, and then write one or two sentences based on each one to get high scores. “I think that school was training you to memorize things,” said Jay. When did Jay stop hating the English language and her teachers, and started acquiring the language? She said that it was not until she started learning it by herself in Form 2, at the age of fourteen, her second year in the elite mission school, the year when one day she and her friends were asked to visualize Jamal’s wedding. This was also the year when she started reading more books, particularly the *Goosebumps* series that was introduced by a friend. Each page in those series led to certain options, and once an option was chosen, it led to further exciting and different adventures. This opened up a wide world of excitement and soon Jay became hooked to reading English books.

At this time, Jay also had to master English in order to fit into the mission school environment where English was widely spoken by teachers and students. From her second year

in this school, she became more proficient in English, but the entire first year was a struggle. “I remember at one point, I actually wrote down Chinese words to understand Malay. I remember we were learning the words T-H-I-S and T-H-E-S-E. I would put down the Chinese characters underneath it to make sure that I was doing it right so that I know about it. I know how to read it. I just don’t know the meaning. That was how I was learning English, by translating the reciprocal meanings.” Five years of being in this school made Jay a student highly proficient in Malay as well as in English.

The *PPSMI* system, introduced by the government to teach math and science in English in 2003, did not impact Jay directly. This policy was started in phases, beginning at the Form 1 level, and Jay missed this because she had passed this grade level by then. Her math and science teachers, thus, continued teaching her class as usual in Malay. However, a few of them were also involved in the PPSMI policy and taught the lower grades. One of her teachers, realizing the value of this system, tried incorporating some English in her teaching, in an informal manner. According to Jay, this teacher introduced to them certain technical words in English that they were actually learning in Malay in the content area classes.

The above student stories show the interplay of their multiple identities within their diverse classroom contexts. For some students who already possessed some English proficiency, negotiations of their identities were not necessary as required. However, for others, the classroom settings might be places where tensions might erupt that call for certain negotiations and reconstruction of their prior identities. Thus, some students might be compelled to make major adjustments in the face of new systems with certain social expectations. For the upcoming section, I looked across all four students’ classroom experiences to understand these complexities

and the identity transformations that took place. In this discussion, issues pertaining to nationalistic ideas, ethnicity, culture, and so forth have been brought to the forefront.

Classroom and Identity Formation

Classroom structures and teachers' attitudes play an important role in the study of students' identity formation. This is because of the important roles played by teachers in the Malaysian top-down educational system, in implementing the national curriculum. In such a system, the society as a whole looks at them as the bearers of the particular type of knowledge needed for examination success. In this respect, teachers and the classroom structures provided by them for the learning of English language, have the capabilities to influence the shaping of students' identities. Students' identities in some of these instances might take either a positive or negative connotation.

The narrations obtained above from the students' various classroom experiences have revealed the multiple ways in which their identities have taken shape. In all these cases, instances of resistance have taken shape but they have all taken different intensities, depending on the differences found at the school level, and the type of classroom structures provided by the teachers in those environments. Two phenomena have emerged in this respect: cultural resistance and global accommodation.

Cultural Resistance

All the four students in this study revealed different aspects of themselves when they showed resistance in their classrooms. Azura and Ani's resistance in their English classes was

reflected in the indifference they showed in learning and using the language since it was not within their linguistic repertoire. On the other hand, in the case of Sarah, the indifference shown was because of the simplicity of the English lessons that often caused her to feel restless. Jay's initial resistance towards the English language was caused by her fierce teacher's attitude. In her case, such feelings were caused by a hatred towards the subject that stemmed from her hatred of her teacher. A teacher looking at all the various instances of resistance mentioned above, might connect those attitudes with students' outright defiance or lack of interest in the subject. While these might be part of the reasons, there could also be deeper meanings that could only be revealed through deeper interrogations of their experiences.

An introspection of Azura and Ani's stories, in relation to their home and school backgrounds, indicate that one plausible reason for such resistance could be cultural factors. As mentioned in the previous chapter, both these students had seen and admired the ways of English-speaking elites who were incidentally also members from their own community. They saw those students' positive attributes that went parallel with their English language proficiency. Knowing the positive attributes that are brought about by possessing English language proficiency, how is it possible for such resistance to occur in the first place? Some of their initial refusal to use English language should not be seen as a refusal at a personal level, but as something motivated by factors that are often invisible to the onlookers.

In the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned one of my own classroom narratives, about a Malay student, Norhayati, who chose silence over speaking in English when she was instructed to do so in her classroom. After a while, when she broke the silence with a little English, she was immediately mocked by a Malay student as being a show-off. I mentioned how at the time when

this happened, in the 1980s, I did not do anything about this event, but how today I wish I had. This is because of the knowledge that I have now of the importance of narratives and the necessity to seek deeper truths. Today, I think that the reasons behind Norhayati's action could be cultural. Looking at Azura and Ani and their multiple experiences related to learning and speaking English, I think that cultural factors could also be the reasons for some of their actions and initial resistance towards the language.

The Malay community is considered to be closely associated with factors involving culture. Cultural factors are imbibed in every aspect of their lives, such as in the areas of language, customs, attire, food, hospitality and so forth. These cultural aspects play a big role in most of the events in their lives such as births, weddings, prayer ceremonies, deaths, etc. Customs and the Islamic way of life, which they have professed unconditionally, play a major role in influencing and impacting how all these events are conducted in their lives. In Chapter 2, it was shown how the Malay language plays a major role in the students' everyday lives, immaterial of their locations in a *kampung* or in an urban setting.

Language nationalism is part of the identity of Malays, as was evident in the way in which they strove to uphold it as the national language in the decade before Malaysia attained its independence. Since the rise of Malay nationalism in the 1920s, such sentiments had increased and eventually led to the replacing of English language with Malay in all aspects of administration. Thus, the Malay language is an important identity marker for the Malays (Rajadurai, 2011). This self-labelling of the Malays as people of ethnic Malay background, who also speak the Malay language, is something that is embedded in their culture. Hence, it has also become an identity professed by the Malay students upon entrance into schools. Such strong

sentiments indicate an admirable communal unity; however, sometimes they also become problematic at the school level when resistance is shown towards learning and speaking the English language. According to a study conducted by Rajadurai (2011), many Malays do attempt to speak in English, but they are often “rebuffed” and “stigmatized.” The speakers are also cast as “show-offs.” One of the research participants in Rajadurai’s study, Farah, said that the widely held notion in the community is that Malays should only speak the Malay language.

According to Lee S. K. (2001), for the Malays, acquiring the English language is sometimes equated as a threat to their native identity. This notion is not shared by everyone in the community, but a deep-rooted resentment is shown towards those who use more English. They are often described using strong words such as “show off,” “boastful,” or “a relic of colonization.” Sometimes, they might also call those who have accepted the English language as being too Westernized and elitist, and as betrayers of Malay cultural and language identity. According to Lee S. K. (2001), this is a sign of the marginalization and alienation of English-language speakers from the others. Thus, the rise of Malay nationalism to mark their special standing has come to be seen as a permanent fixture, and not accepting or abiding by it is considered as a sign of disrespect and disloyalty to one’s own roots. Thus, in the public arenas in Malaysia, such as in the schools and classroom settings, the Malays pose the strongest resistance (Ratnawati, 2005, Mardziah & Wong, 2006).

Keeping these cultural factors in mind, it is not surprising that Azura and Ani encountered great difficulties in engaging with English language. As Ani mentioned, it is “weird” to speak among themselves in English, especially when the other speaker knows Malay. Thus, years of maintaining a dominant Malay identity that is reinforced by their home environment, does not

make things easier when they enter schools. Instead, it leads to instances of resistance and indifference that necessitate negotiations or reconstructions of their identities. The English speaking Malays, on the other hand, stand out differently because of the social capital acquired from the English-medium school experiences that some of the family members might have enjoyed in the past, or from other current exposures. When in the midst of this group, the non-speakers are sometimes “dismissed, neglected or excluded” from participation and thus, the exposure to English continues being minimum. Rajadurai (2011) finds this problematic, just as I do, and asks, “If the Malay student’s identity is interwoven with his or her medium of communication, how, where, when and with whom is he or she to use English and what that is are its consequences?” (p. 74). This situation poses problems to the teachers. According to Thiagarajah (2003), in the rural schools teachers need to strive for students’ English proficiency against a backdrop where the language is almost non-existent in their lives.

Outside the school setting, at the societal level, this issue takes a gigantic form, because resistance embedded within cultural considerations negatively impacts their employability, particularly in the private sector. Thus, the nationalist educational policy has created Chinese and Indians who have become bilinguals and trilinguals, whereas Malays who received education in the Malay language have “failed to achieve even a rudimentary level of English” (Hassan , 2005, p. 7), and have remained monolinguals. As a result of this, according to him, the policy has in fact produced “more adverse repercussions,” whereby the Malays are discriminated against in employment, and they also have problems in further education.

These are also the issues that loomed ahead of me as I listened to Azura and Ani’s stories of resistance caused by cultural considerations. This phenomena, however, did not show in the

stories shared by Sarah and Jay, the Indian and Sino-Kadazan participants, respectively. Their classroom and school stories did not speak of resistance in the way the Malay participants had spoken. They portrayed a global outlook, which also had some elements of resistance, but they were not shown towards the English language as much.

Global Accomodation

Beginning with the colonization period, English was associated with social status and elitism. This took a backseat with the implementation of the nationalistic educational policy that favored the Malay language. For a while, it looked as though the government was succeeding in this effort, especially by 1983, when Malay had already replaced the English language until the university level. However, certain events stemming from globalization and parents' change in attitudes regarding certain policies began to bring English gradually into the limelight. It almost seemed as though economics had outweighed national interests.

Thus, while English language proficiency was seen to be dropping in the school system, particularly among the Malay population, it was thriving in the private sector due to its status as the “language of corporate business and industry, banking and finance” (Gill 2005, p. 12). Non-Malays had, for a long time, considered themselves sidelined by the New Economic Policy (NEP) that was put in place in the 1970s, alongside the national educational policies with the aim to bring the Malays to be on par with them. This policy put in place various affirmative structures that favored Malays in many areas of life, particularly in the economy and in education. A racialistic quota system was upheld that particularly specified the demographic structure of students' intake into local institutions of higher learning; it is currently standing at about 68% for the Malays, 25% of the seats had been allocated for the Chinese, and 10% for the

Indians. This situation eventually led the non-Malays to private colleges, despite the high cost, because they did not impose Malay language requirements as was done by the nationalistic government, or racialistic quota system in the intake of students. Thus, many of these non-Malay students were able to achieve educational excellence in a mostly English-speaking environment, with a far more global outlook. In the midst of their home languages, there was also more use of English language, at varying levels. At times like this, Malay, the national language, was only appropriated in their lives as needed, as evident in Sarah's life.

This situation created a dichotomy in the society in the way language issues were spoken about in Malaysia. A majority of the Malays, with their cultural and language sentiments, continued using their native language at home, sometimes interspersed with some English, and their children continued their education in the national schools that are lately branded as being increasingly Malayized. This shows the vast divergence in the identities taken upon by Malay and non-Malay students in Malaysia. Such a situation is seen as a continuation of the elite system that existed during the British colonial period. At that time, the division that existed was between the masses and those who came from aristocratic and rich Malay families, urban Chinese, and Indians. English language monopoly might have been taken off the school system but the impact played in different ways among the students, particularly among the Malays. In the long run, eventually, the Malaysian government did turn back on its own previous language policies that it now saw as an impediment to the Malays' educational and employability prospects. Some of the rural non-Malay students, those from the *estate* and the *kampung*, were also under a similar predicament.

The government now saw the need for global economic participation and to prepare its citizens with global skills. In 2002, it re-introduced English for the teaching of math and science

subjects at the primary and secondary school levels. This was a policy that brought more English usage in the classroom, and possibly impacted students' attitudes and perceptions towards the language in a powerful manner, especially with the numerous debates that were going on arguing for and against this new language policy. This policy could possibly have helped build the confidence level among the Malays, in terms of improving their command of English and increasing the amount of its usage time in the classroom. It could have possibly narrowed the widening gap that was emerging in society in terms of English language speakers and non-English speakers. Unfortunately, things did not quite happen the way it was planned, to the disadvantage of this group of non-English students. It was found that the expert teachers who in the past taught math and science in the Malay language, were now struggling to do so in English. This was a generation produced by the nationalistic policy of the government that favored Malay, beginning in the 1970s. These teachers, most of them Malays, were sent for numerous training during the school year, and yet the task of teaching two important content area subjects in English was too daunting for them.

According to Seoyeon Choi (2010), some of the lessons came with CD-ROMS that showed virtual teachers who spoke fluent English. These virtual teachers taught lessons using perfect English, and with very little Malaysian accent or grammatical errors, unlike the Malaysian teachers who struggled with grammar. Choi said further, "To make the language transition less burdensome, new textbooks left out some topics that had been included in old ones in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language). As a result, the new curricula provided less information about each topic than the previous one. The introduction of the "global language" into the inner-city school did not automatically connect the students and teachers to the sea of scientific knowledge produced in English," (p. 185). Apart from that, based on her observations of nine

lessons and teacher interviews under the PPSMI policy, Asiah Mohd Sharif (2013) reported that 40% of the teachers were still using Malay in the classroom. Most of the teachers used very simple English, and with errors. As a result of this, it was found that there was a distortion in the content knowledge that was imparted to the students. This made them poor models for students. The struggles faced by the classroom teachers, the ineffectiveness in the way the PPSMI policy was implemented, and the continuous nationalistic debates in the wider society eventually led to abolishing the system, just five years after its inception.

Thus overall, the students in this study have had their identities shaped differently as a result of these various classroom experiences. Some of the differences had to do with the classroom make up, and some of them had to do with the kind of English language policies put in place by the government, and some of them were due to the types of teachers who were assigned to teach them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, thus far I have explored the issues of how students' attitudes and perceptions, obtained via their homes and schools, have been further impacted by their classroom experiences, leading to further construction and reconstruction of their identities. In the exploration of how these language issues have impacted their personal identities, certain notions about their ethnic, national, and global identities have emerged. In the next chapter, I looked at the students' personal stories in regards to their English language use in the social realm, to explore how their prior experiences carried on from their homes and schools have further shaped and reconstructed their identities.

CHAPTER FOUR

As the Ground Shifts

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), it is necessary to move back and forth between experiences in a continuum, from the personal stories to the social, while at the same time looking at them in terms of their past, present, and future. With this in mind, I began my last interviews, and focus group session with the four Malaysian students with two objectives: I wanted them to narrate further memorable stories about their interactions in the English language outside their home, school and classroom contexts, and I wanted to know their personal opinions about certain social happenings in the larger Malaysian context. By gathering these personal and social stories, and by going back and forth between them, I hoped to determine how these experiences had impacted and shaped one another. I also hoped to glean insights to understand how their self-identities, in relation to the national narratives, impacted and shaped their overall ethnic, national, and global identities.

In the upcoming section, I have retold the stories shared by the student participants, beginning with Azura and Ani, the Malay participants, and moving on to Sarah and Jay, the Indian and Sino-Kadazan student respectively, about their use of English in the social realm.

Out-of-School Narratives

Azura

One day, Azura, the student from the *kampung* in Kedah, the northern state in Peninsula Malaysia, went back home for one of her college breaks. This was the time when she was undertaking her two-year program before going abroad for her undergraduate program in the

U.S. Once back home, she engaged in conversations with her family members as usual, using her native Malay language. At that time, unconsciously, she uttered a single word in English to her brother. This had never occurred in her household before, since no one spoke English at home, not even at this time in the 1980s when the impending forces of globalization were already affecting Malaysia. Hearing Azura utter a single word in English, her brother immediately looked at her and burst into laughter. She was taken aback. “Oh my god!” she thought. “I am sure that I spoke the right English word. Maybe he didn’t like it. I don’t know. He laughed at me as though I was showing off!” she said. He did not even give an explanation for his laughter. Today, Azura could not recall the word that she said on that day, but she could not help wondering about the thinking that went on behind that day’s event. I asked Azura if that was the first time she had used English at home. “First and only time!” she said.

Azura narrated another incident that happened back in her dorm in the college, where she was living with a few close friends. They were all from different parts of Malaysia, but of similar language and socio-economic backgrounds. One day, she suggested to this group of friends that they should practice speaking in English among themselves, at least in the dorm. They refused. She did not ask them again, and everyone continued speaking in Malay, as they had always done. Azura had in fact put across this suggestion because of the insistence of one of her English lecturers in the college that students should engage in more conversations in English. Azura was naturally interested to do this because of her trip to the U.S. that was going to follow shortly after her college program. Furthermore, the program also evaluated them on their participation level in the classroom. This was in fact a period in her life when her attitudes towards English had undergone positive transformations, but the chance had not come yet where she could use it fully for lack of a non-challenging environment where she did not have to face embarrassment in front

of the modern English-speaking Malay students. The dorm seemed like a good unthreatening option, but her spirits were nipped in the bud.

In an earlier chapter, I mentioned about a phenomenon propounded by Roff (1994), “the Malay Mindset,” the distinct mannerisms in which the members from the Malay community conduct themselves according to cultural norms and expectations. Not doing so will often lead to questions, head-shakes, disapproval, and sometimes even labeling of all sorts, within the community. I wanted to know if this was still the case in Malaysia, at a time when it had become increasingly globalized. According to Azura, things are changing, but very slowly. According to her, it is true that the Malays did not want others to think badly of them, and so they would constrain from indulging in eye-brow raising acts such as using too much English, especially when speaking with community members outside educational institutions. “But actually nowadays it is changing. People don’t think this way. It is not like that anymore. It is not like it used to be!” exclaimed Azura. “Maybe last time, people wanted to show that they know more but it is not like that anymore... But what I can say from my experience is that if you know both English and Malay, it is better. Nowadays, if you don’t know English, they look down at you,” she continued.

How will she speak when she goes back to Malaysia very soon, now that she has acquired more English in the U.S. as a doctoral student? Will she use more English? She said, “When I start working next time, I don’t think I am going to use English all the time. You know at work place, you know the Malay culture how people look at you if you are different from other people. Even though you don’t care about what people talk about you, but when you do things that people don’t like, like show off and don’t use Malay language anymore, they look down on you.” Knowing how people in her community will look at her, Azura was thus of the

opinion that she will only use English when the other person uses it first. Even then, she said it will not be in Standard English. She will use “*rojak* language” instead, speaking English using a very distinctive Malay slang. She described what this entails, even though I knew very well what it meant, being a Malaysian myself. “In this kind of talk, sometimes there won’t be too many English words in one sentence but it will still sound like English.” Azura said that the advantage of speaking in this manner is that when she is unsure or uncomfortable with certain English structures in the midst of her talk, this will be a good way to cover it up.

Hearing about Azura’s preferences in using English in her community in Malaysia, I thought her inability or lack of interest to change her manner of speech is because of the age group she belongs to. At the time of my interviews with Azura, she was forty and a mother of five. If she had been about a decade younger, like the other three participants, probably it would have been easier for her to do things differently, without fearing the community’s perceptions about her actions. Looking at this from a Malaysian perspective, I thought that it might have been easier for her if she had been younger. Now, in her role as a mother of five, and someone who will be looked up to in the community as an elder, her actions and mannerisms will be expected to follow a particular norm. Going against it will mean being disrespectful to their identity and cultural expectations.

As a student who had undergone almost her entire schooling in Malaysia as a struggling English language learner and user, I wondered how Azura’s views about her students were transformed upon her return from the U.S. with her first degree, when she became a secondary school teacher for ten years. According to Azura, she became more sympathetic and understanding towards her students because during this ten-year period, she taught English as well, even though she was trained in math and accounting. “Every time when they (school

authorities) don't have enough English teachers, they usually picked me just because I came from overseas. I told them, 'I didn't do English. I went to study Accounting. My English is still not good,' and yet they picked me saying 'You can speak!'" Thus, for ten years Azura was always requested by the school to fill up the English-teaching slots, and she was forced to do it without an option of refusing it. Her only consolation was that she could request to teach non-examination classes. In the Malaysian context, it is the norm that certain grade levels that have to face national examinations, will have the English lessons taught by teachers who had done English majors. Azura was always able to get the lower grade classes that were not as challenging because the students came from a small town and most of them spoke in broken English. According to Azura, teaching those classes was also a learning experience for her.

With her background as someone who came from a non-English speaking environment and who had struggled with the language during her school days, she showed lots of empathy towards her students. "I taught English using *Bahasa* (Malay language). Just like how people taught *Bahasa* in English for Americans. I taught English in *Bahasa* most of the time but sometimes I also used a little English because I will feel guilty if I don't use English to teach them!" said Azura. She had a good rationale for doing this. Her primary goal in teaching English to her students, who were mostly not proficient in the language, was to help them to understand. Thus, she used a lot of Malay in her teaching, interspersed with some English, and she always asked them questions to ensure that they could comprehend the lessons. "I wanted them to understand. When I used Malay to explain, they understood. I know it was wrong but then I didn't care," she rationalized.

During her teaching of English for ten years, Azura noticed how her Chinese and Indian students in this suburban school were always slightly better in their English than the Malays.

“They will simply talk. They don’t care. But Chinese students who came from rural Malay areas were worse, Malays were even worse. They don’t really talk in English if they feel it is in ‘broken’ form. They are so shy,” Azura said, expressing her concerns. Her advice to her students at that time was simple: “Just talk. Just see how the Chinese and Indians are. You just talk, even if it is not correct.” In spite of her advice, Azura admitted that they were still shy, and they did not attempt to speak. After many years of teaching English, Azura found it getting easier. “Yes! Yes! I didn’t have to do preparation anymore!” she said explaining why.

Azura also narrated her present time in the U.S. with her children. She hopes things will be different for them in terms of English language acquisition for their own success. Even before coming to the U.S., in spite of her own problems in communicating in English, she had tried to tell the importance of the language to her children. “When we were in Malaysia, I was worried because of the environment there where they only learn English in school. Even though we know how to speak English, we never spoke at home. We spoke mostly Malay,” she said. “I was worried about their English because I know that nowadays it is hard to get a job without English.” With this realization, even in Malaysia, before coming to the U.S., she often asked her children to watch cartoons in English so that they would pick up some English along the way but they always refused and opted for Malay versions. About bringing her children now to the U.S., she mentioned how she is happy at being able to do it. “I always think that this opportunity to come here to the U.S. is not only for me but also for them because it changes a lot of things,” she said. She also mentioned how her children now have acquired more proficiency in English language, and that sometimes they are even able to correct her grammatical errors. Another thing she noted was how they had picked up an American accent, and she is happy about it.

All the accounts narrated above, point to the fact that the development of Azura's identities towards learning and using English had been gradual but consistent. Even during my interviews with her, she expressed dejection at still having low English proficiency. In spite of this inadequacy that she perceives within herself, she has come a long way to be able to feel that she is finally using the language without hesitating, unlike the time long ago when she was laughed at for using a single English word. Or, when once she had to gather her dorm friends to have conversations in English. Now she is comfortable in doing it with ease, in spite of the reservations that she continues to have about her grammatical correctness.

In the next section, I have explored Ani's experiences surrounding her English language usage outside her school context to see how they had shaped and reconstructed her identities in the social realm.

Ani

Ani, also of Malay ethnicity, narrated about a time when she and her three friends were returning to Malaysia for summer vacation from the U.S., at the end of their first year of undergraduate studies. After a nearly twenty-four hour flight, she arrived at the KL International Airport and was about to come out with her luggage when suddenly she overheard a loud phone conversation in English. A Malay man, referring to himself as "uncle," and who was probably in his thirties, was requesting the other person on the phone to pick him up at the airport. He was speaking using "broken" English. Upon hearing this, Ani said during my interview with her, "My friends and I simply looked at each other. It has been a while since we heard that kind of English. Here in the U.S., we hardly hear people speak broken English. So interesting to hear that now! We simply looked at each other. After one year of not listening to broken English, it was

interesting... He spoke in English but it was broken English. He mixed some Malay.” For a while, Ani said, she and her two friends did not say anything to one another but just shared glances. Later, they talked among themselves about how they had not heard “that kind of English” for quite a while.

Ani also narrated about another event that she found to be memorable because on that day, a few people made her realize a few things about herself that she had not realized before. This happened one day when she was in the private college in Negeri Sembilan. At this time, Ani had already become more inclined to use English, more than before because of the environment she was in where most of the students spoke in English. That day, she decided to meet a few of her ex-Malay schoolmates somewhere in Kuala Lumpur. At that time, they too were studying in local institutions, but they had gone to the ones that were mostly attended by Malay students. They had not met for a while since the time when all of them had left secondary school, so they had a lot of things to talk about on that day when they met. During this meeting, which lasted for more than an hour, unbeknownst to her, Ani was using more English, a fact observed by her friends. For Ani, at this time, she had gradually started using slightly more English than before. Her friends, on the other hand, as usual spoke mostly in Malay, especially since they were studying in institutions with a majority of Malay students who spoke in a similar way. Thus, in this case it can be seen how contextual factors play a major role in how identities take shape. In this case, due to the different locations that Ani and her friends were in, their English language competencies and the accompanying attitudes and identities had evolved in different ways.

Thus, by this time it was evident how Ani’s initial resistance during her school days had undergone transformation upon her entry into the social realm, first as a college student in

Malaysia, and later, now, as an undergraduate student in the U.S. In both these new settings, the English language slowly became a part of her linguistic repertoire. After a few years of being in the U.S. and engaging in conversations with the international community, she slowly gained more confidence, so much so that some of her Malay friends in the U.S. used to say, “Oh! You can speak English! Your English is good! You know a lot more!” Some of them even commented that she could pass for a local student with her English proficiency, indicating how people’s perceptions, especially in matters of language, can be different and are again based on contextual factors. At this time, a major transformation was also beginning to take shape in Ani. She became greatly drawn to anyone, Malaysians or otherwise, who could speak English with a foreign accent. She admired accents especially that were particularly not “like the Malay way of speaking!” Of these people, she used to wonder which schools could have provided them with such an “awesome” accent. By this time, she had come to believe that foreign accents are indicative of a person’s social class and elitism and gradually, she, too, wanted to be part of that elite group.

Now that she had acquired English and had made it a great part of her life, particularly as a student in a foreign country, I wondered how she defined herself now. Ani was quick to say that she considered herself “Malay, a Malaysian, and a Muslim.” This was exactly what was also mentioned by Azura when I asked her in the first interview to describe her background.

Ethnicity, nationality, and religion were aspects of Malay identity that were strong in these two students. Not surprisingly, these Malay students had a strong sense of home, with home being Malaysia. The Constitution of Malaysia has defined the Malays as those who habitually speak Malay, profess Islam as their religion, and follow Malay cultural practices (Milner, 2010; Mohamad & Aljunied, 2011). This strong identification is imbued in the Malay community from

a young age, as can be seen in the way their home contexts in the *kampung* and the urban setting had been structured, connected in terms of ethnicity, religion, cultural practices, and language.

My conversations with Ani made me think that Ani's attachment to her language is also particularly strong. She seemed like a nationalist when she started speaking about her native language, Malay. She mentioned about a time in her secondary school when for the first time she had a Chinese classmate who had his primary education in a Chinese vernacular school. At that time, she had insisted in speaking to him only in Malay, despite knowing his problems in the language. English was as problematic for him as much as it was for her. She could have chosen to speak to him in English but she insisted on Malay. In her private college, Ani saw more non-Malay students like him who, despite years of studying the Malay language, and various content area subjects in it, had not mastered it sufficiently for everyday use. Ani often watched as some of these students, who were highly proficient in English but not as much in Malay, struggled to prepare themselves when they had to attend interviews in Malay. Those students often needed a lot of practice in Malay before going for their interviews, and so they often had to obtain assistance from the Malay students like Ani.

Thus, Ani implied her strong nationalistic feelings here, the idea that students should possess a high proficiency level in Malay due to its position as the national language. However, in a contradictory manner, she also said that Malaysians who were raised abroad need not necessarily have to know Malay. Furthermore, she also did not think that language is the only feature that identifies an ethnic group. She rationalized that some of the Malays born in English-speaking countries might end up using more English and very little Malay, and that they might speak with a foreign accent; however, this does not take away their labels as Malaysians and ethnic Malays. Knowing less Malay language does not make them any less Malay, since

culturally and ethnically they still belong to the same group. According to Ani, a Malaysian should still be considered Malaysian even though he/she has lost his language identity.

Thus, throughout my interviews with Ani, she came across with a strong sense of national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity; however, she was also of the belief that language should not be looked at as the only basis for identity construction. For her, what is more important is the place to which a person feels he/she belongs.

Sarah

Sarah's most memorable out-of-school experience where she used the English language took place during an interview that she attended for a government scholarship to study abroad. Knowing that the interview would be conducted in Malay, she had prepared for it long before that, anticipating all the possible questions and the responses she would give. On that day, two Malay men and an Indian woman questioned her in Malay. Sarah answered their questions in Malay very confidently, but after about a minute or two, she discovered that she was unable to continue anymore despite her days of preparation. That was when she decided to speak by switching between Malay and English. After a while, even that became harder, and slowly she switched completely to English. Towards the end of the interview, she was answering all their questions in English. She answered all their questions, but unfortunately she did not obtain the scholarship. She suspected that this could probably be for not submitting the research proposal that they had expected.

This story indicates how Sarah's issue was only with the Malay language in spite of its being her medium of instruction throughout her schooling. The truth was, according to her, she

never had an interest to do any extra reading in Malay. She mentioned some of the instances during her schooling days when she searched for English story books to read, since she always ran out of them fast. On the other hand, when it came to Malay, she did not have such feelings. Outside school, she had never felt the urge to search for Malay books to read. “I don’t know why. I am not prone to reading Malay books. I don’t think you can find one Malay book in my house,” she said, to emphasize her point. After hearing about Sarah’s struggles with the Malay language and the ease that she naturally felt towards English, I wondered what Sarah thought of the status of the Malay language in Malaysia, and where she placed it in her life.

Sarah does not think that the nationalistic policy in Malaysia is working or that proficiency in the Malay language is essential to possess a Malaysian identity, or even to create unity. Is this not being anti-nationalistic? Sarah does not think so. “If that was the government’s purpose, to unite everyone, then I don’t think so. No. I think if they wanted to do that, they should have picked something neutral. English was neutral. Malay was one sided. They should have picked something neutral,” she said. On the other hand, she thinks it is an ideal situation to have high proficiency in the national language, but not as much when things are being done at an international level. “We are not self-sufficient. We have to communicate with other countries... So I think you should know *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay language) if you are a Malaysian. At least a little bit. But you don’t have to be proficient in it... English is really the best medium for that. We can’t expect other people to know our language... I feel that if you want to progress as a nation, you are really going back if you are using a different language on the other part of the world... If you are participating in research and everything, you can’t present your findings. Nobody is going to benefit from that. Why not just use one language that everybody understands?” she asked.

In Sarah's opinion, everybody should have some English, but not for reasons of acquiring social status. She does not think that English is necessarily a tool to attain social status. "I don't think it should be a symbol of class. I don't know if it is or not, but it should not be," she said. While having such a strong opinion on this, on the other hand, Sarah is also aware of what some of the people's perceptions about her would be, with the associations that she has with English language. In the Malaysian context, someone like Sarah will be looked up to due to her educational background in a prestigious school, overseas exposure, an American English accent, parents who are professionals, a high standard of living, and so forth. Therefore, she said that sometimes she tries to speak using "broken English," or *Manglish*, so as not to have people get intimidated by the way she speaks. For her, *Manglish* is part of the Malaysian identity and our own national language. "I think it is good in a way that we have come up with our own national language. There are all sorts of words in it. There are Chinese words in it, there are Indian words in it and everybody speaks it. Everybody understands it, so I think that's good. .. I think it works better than saying *Bahasa Malaysia* is our national language. I think this language that we have created (*Manglish*) has a more uniting factor. This is English but Malaysianized English...I think if you speak in perfect English, people might not understand you but if you speak in that *Manglish* kind of thing they will understand you better," she said.

Sarah then mentioned about her two-year working experience in a Chinese private health center that she obtained after her undergraduate studies. In this place, according to Sarah, elitism did exist to a certain extent, even though at the personal level she wanted to believe that the English language should not be associated with elitism. Sarah worked in this environment with many Malays and Chinese. The Malay employees here, according to Sarah, only knew "basic" English, so she often communicated with them in her broken Malay. "Sometimes the Malay girls

would try to speak but then after a while they will switch back to Malay,” said Sarah. Generally, this place required a lot of English because some of the patients were from the higher income group and from multiple nations. According to Sarah, some of these patients were elites who even had separate entrances to enter the medical center. Some of them even came in with their own bodyguards! “So, you HAVE to speak English with this group,” said Sarah. “You HAVE to switch your language style to fit the different people. So when faced with different people, you tend to switch your language to match them. Maybe there is inbuilt class in this, but there shouldn’t be,” added Sarah.

Overall, English played a more important role in Sarah’s life than any other languages, not even the national language or Tamil, one of her native languages. Similar to the Malay language, Tamil too was not of much interest to her, with her background as the second generation to grow up speaking only in English. She mentioned the manner in which her mom used to nudge her over the slightly low grades that she sometimes might obtain in English. Even if Sarah had obtained 97% for her English, her mom sometimes used to say, “Oh! Why never get 100%? ... Well, if you didn’t, you will have to start talking in Tamil!” This is an indication of how Sarah’s identities were structured around the importance given to English in her family circle. My further conversations with Sarah indicated to me that these loose ties with her Indian language could possibly be because of the stronger sentiments that she felt about being a global citizen than about possessing a strong ethnic and national identity.

While claiming global identity as her main attribute, Sarah also mentioned that if asked to choose between being an Indian and a Malaysian, she would opt for a Malaysian identity. This ethnic identity had been fluid in her family even as a child. “I am a citizen of the world. I am just

drifting through life on my own. ... When I was younger I was moving around a lot. I don't know. I don't have that sense of home," she said. Sarah came up with a question. "How could Malaysia be home if there is this concept of *non-Bumiputera*?" ... Honestly, at this point I don't really have that sense of nationalism," Thus, Sarah's sense of national identity went beyond the physical national boundaries to encompass anyplace in the world where her family was. "It (Malaysia) is just a place I was born. I don't identify with it in any other way. I guess for me home is where the family is. If my family was in Australia, then that's my home," she said.

I wondered if the transient nature that showed in Sarah could be a result of all her moves as a little girl in Malaysia. Sarah reaffirmed this, and she also related this to the Malaysian concept of *balik kampung*, which literally means "returning to one's village (home)," the act of returning to one's place of birth, to which most people feel a strong attachment. This term could mean different things to different people. It could be the place where one's parents are still living, the place of birth, or the one place where all loved ones gather for celebrations and festivals. "Maybe in the previous generation, there is this *home town* and *balik kampung* concept. But I was born in the city. I lived in the city. I moved around but I always came back to KL. I don't have a longing to be in KL," said Sarah. Incidentally, the Malays have a strong association with this word since many of them actually have their settlements still in the *kampung* area. Many of them might have migrated to the town areas for studies and employment, but the multiple trips back to their *kampung* is an event always looked forward to. In the case of Sarah, she said she has no such sentiments. "I got no *kampung*" she said.

As a member of the Sino-Kadazan community who feels that her official category as a *Bumiputera* is only at a surface level, I was interested to find out how Jay's experiences had been

shaped. In the next section, I explore her multiple experiences that shaped her perspectives and identities in terms of her ethnicity and her national and global aspirations.

Jay

One day, a few days before I was to meet Jay for another round of interviews, she emailed me an article ¹⁴ that talked about her people in Sabah, the Kadazans, and the introduction of their language, Kadazandusun. When I met her a few days later, I had already read this article, and I asked her more about it in order to find out more about her interest in reading such articles. She said, “I think it is growing. Trying to see who you are, trying to learn who you are, what you believe in. It is a little bit... it brings up those questions, I think.” According to Jay, she was in fact reading about a legend called *Nunuk Ragang* when she discovered this particular article that talked about the language issues among the indigenous people in Sabah. That was when she decided to share it with me.

Nunuk Ragang is a legend held dearly in the minds of the indigenous Kadazan people in Sabah (or the *Dusun* people, as they were categorized once by the British, a fact that I gathered from the article that Jay shared with me). *Nunuk Ragang* is in fact a famous legend that is about how the Kadazan people came to be in this part of Borneo. According to this often told narrative, their ancestors originated from a village named Nunuk Ragang. This was at a place named Tampias, where three rivers, Liwagu, Takashaw, and Gelibang, met. Nunuk Ragang literally means “red banyan tree.” The Kadazans hold the steadfast belief that this is the tree from which they believe all of them originated. To commemorate this rich history, a monument shaped like a

¹⁴ Reid, A. (1997). Endangered identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia). *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 28(1). pp. 120-136.

banyan tree was established here, which today has become an auspicious location that is attracting many pilgrimages and tourists.

As a little girl growing up in Sabah, Jay was never told about this legend. She said, “My grandparents and even my mother never told us our stories, any of the legends that surround our people such as *Nunuk Ragang*. When we were younger, it was never those kinds of stories.” Jay does not think that her grandmother, who had her education until Standard 3, knew any of those stories either. “But she did tell us the stories about *Pengait* which is about head hunters... but never about *Nunuk Ragang* or *Hominodun*, the reason why we celebrate the Harvest Festival.” The mention about the “Harvest Festival” soon started another story sequence from her. This festival is known as *Kaamatan*, to commemorate Huminodun, the only daughter of Kionoingan who was long ago sacrificed to spare the people from severe drought and famine. According to the legend, her body parts were then planted as seeds, which later became rice, a great food resource around the world. Since then, this harvest festival is celebrated in dedication to the *Bambaazon* or rice spirit.

The *Nunuk Ragang* festival is celebrated annually in the month of May but the climax of this event is on the last two days of the month, which are declared public holidays by the state of Sabah. According to Jay, the *Kaamatan* celebrations entail a variety of entertainment and activities in the form of dances, parades, tribal food, traditional sports, singing contests, and arts and crafts sales. People from different tribal groups all over Sabah travel far to attend these events, dressed in their colorful and traditional clothes. The *Unduk Ngadau* beauty pageants are always the highlight of this event, and they are held at the village, district, and state levels.

Speaking passionately about the *Nunuk Ragang* and the *Kaamatan* celebrations, Jay confided about the long trip that she was quietly planning to go to Sabah that year that would coincide with the dates of the festival. The last time she attended the festival was four years ago with her grandmother, and this year, she wanted to surprise her family members at this special time of the year. “My grandmother loved the celebrations,” said Jay. “When I was younger, I went with her a couple of times. She will usually go with her younger sister. So there would be like two older women, my grandmother and her sister, with two young kids because I used to go with my cousin also.” According to Jay, all four of them took the bus to the great hall where the vibrant and colorful celebrations were held. “It was actually a good time,” recalled Jay.

I soon realized that Jay’s passion was not just for her cultural past but also for her Kadazan language. Ironically, this only came out in the midst of hearing about her English language speaking experiences outside her school environment. Jay started by reminiscing about two incidents that were memorable to her. The first incident happened when she was with a car instructor in Sabah. This was a time when she had just returned to Malaysia from the U.S. during one of her university breaks. That day, she remembered how the cab instructor kept on talking to her in English, and Jay was worried that her American accent might come out if she started to talk. She had just returned from abroad and did not want to appear snobbish or a show off with a foreign accent. Luckily, according to Jay, when she started to speak after a while, she was able to do it using her Malaysian accent. Only then did she feel relieved. Jay also mentioned another episode that happened at the airport when she was returning home from the U.S. That day, she had just reached Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah, when her attention was immediately drawn to a person who was speaking the Malay language with a distinct Sabahan accent. Jay was drawn to this accent that she had not heard for a long time. Jay’s talk after this

switched to some of her opinions about her native language, Kadazan, and Malay, that was adopted as the spoken language at home.

It was mentioned earlier that Malay was not Jay's native tongue, but one that was collectively decided by her community to master due to its status as the national language of Malaysia. Jay said, "At that time, people were trying to switch from speaking Kadazan to Malay. So most of the kids didn't know how to speak Kadazan. I did not learn how to speak Kadazan too. I knew words but never full sentences. They wanted to make sure that the future generation knew how to speak Malay. So they spoke Malay more at home." Jay mentioned that by the time it was her generation, the people who were earlier using more Kadazan had dwindled to become speakers of Malay language. She said, "My mom's generation spoke Kadazan at home but at my generation, less people spoke Kadazan. Now, it is becoming less. Now, not many spoke Kadazan." Jay expressed her sadness that more people were switching to Malay and English from Kadazan. She now looks back at how even her grandmother, who was of pure Kadazan background, had not used it with her at home. I asked Jay if she wished that she had learned her own language as a little girl. "I do," she answered. "I asked my mother why you didn't teach us Kadazan when we were younger and my mother said 'Oh! But I didn't raise you when you were younger kids.' On the other hand, when I asked my grandmother, I got the answer 'Oh! You will never understand what I am saying if I speak in Kadazan anyways.'"

Interestingly, according to Jay, her grandmother had in recent days started to use it more with her grandchildren when they hardly know the language. A few times, when her grandmother started to speak more in Kadazan, the grandchildren had to decipher what she was saying. "*Apa mak? Apa mak? Tak faham!*" (What grandmother? What grandmother? Don't understand!), they

used to say. Sometimes, Jay and her siblings would try to make up meanings about what their grandmother had said, and they would come to conclusions such as “Okay! She probably wants us to go eat now!” Interestingly, situated outside Malaysia at this time, Jay feels the loss of Kadazan language more than in the past. Recently, she tried learning it on her own, but she is often left feeling frustrated. According to Jay, Kadazan is considered a difficult language because, unlike Malay, which is phonetic-based, Kadazan words are found as long chunks, making it really hard to pronounce. “If I try to pronounce it, it is like I am slaughtering the language. It will sound weird,” said Jay.

Lately, such frustrations also started appearing for her native Chinese language as well. Just that morning, Jay said, she had tried reading again the paper on the Chinese New Year zodiac signs that her father had recently sent to her, along with a letter. Jay considered this paper as a very special thing, especially coming from her dad, whose usual phone conversations from Sabah were never more than a minute at a time. They were usually just a series of questions, such as “How are you? How is school? How is your exam? Are you sleeping and eating okay? Okay, good bye!” Reading her zodiac sign that morning, the only meaning that Jay was able to glean was something about driving at night. “I know I shouldn’t drive at night. That’s about it. I shouldn’t drive at night. Okay, that’s good. But that’s the only thing I learned... For the life of me, I cannot read Chinese anymore!” exclaimed Jay. This exasperation was intensified, especially since she had attended a Chinese vernacular school for six years in Sabah before entering an elite mission school for her secondary education where soon, put in an English-speaking environment, she gained more of that language. Jay explained, “So, Chinese has two types of writing. One is the older way of writing. There are more strokes to it. Usually newspapers are printed in that kind of form. So he (my dad) sent me that form. What I learnt in

school was the simplified Chinese character. So I can read certain words on the piece of paper but I cannot understand the entire thing.” She is not the only one with such a predicament. According to her, these days it is common to see students in her community with complete Chinese names but who do not have proficiency in the Chinese language.

Recently, Jay had noticed an interesting trend among some of her family members. Apart from her grandmother, who had started using more Kadazan with her grandchildren, and her father, who for the first time had sent her texts in Chinese, she could see more family members trying to revive the home languages. Jay and her older brother were put in Chinese vernacular schools; on the other hand, her younger brother and sister were sent to public schools that taught the Kadazan language. Her grandfather, who only spoke to her in Malay, and occasionally in English, is now conversing in the Kadazan language with her younger siblings. An uncle, her mom’s younger brother, who is living in Peninsula Malaysia, is ensuring that his three young children are picking up the Kadazan language. They are now conversant in Kadazan, English, Chinese, and Malay, compared to Jay’s two languages, and they are so much younger! With such thoughts about her cultural heritage and native languages, I wondered where she placed herself in terms of her rich indigenous heritage and the modernity of English language that life had thrust upon her. “I always have a clash with how I was brought up and who I am... Your race is there, your story, your ancestors’ stories. So it is a little bit trying to balance it... and being from a mixed background too. I have questions such as do I read more about this or do I read more about my Chinese background? But sometimes I don’t really think about it. But it has come across my mind” she replied.

Probably it is due to such questions about how to balance things that Jay had started to take particular positions in the use of language. These days, she often wonders why some Malaysians are not their normal selves after acquiring English language proficiency, whether they are eloquent in it or not. She mentioned about the times when she called home to Sabah when a few of her relatives happened to be there. At times like that, usually the phone was passed from one member to another, and she often noticed the great effort some of them took to converse in English. She used to think at those times: Why the need to speak to me in English, just because I am studying abroad? Why not use Malay as usual? When asked if this is because the English language is creating a class system in Malaysia, she said she hoped not. She said that some people might feel they stand out by doing that. It is entirely up to individuals. “Hopefully it won’t create a class of people who would feel offended if you speak in a particular accent.”

When asked how she sees herself in terms of her national identity, Jay was quick to say that she feels closer to her regional Sabahan identity than Malaysian. She said, “I like the concept of Malaysia. I really love the *Malaysia Truly Asia* concept promoted by Tourism Malaysia that says ‘Oh! We are all one big family, Truly Asia.’ It is *Truly Asia* just on the surface. We have so many races, so many religions. Everybody supposed to live with each other happily ever after, but underneath it there are so many segregations.” Jay also mentioned about the many race-based politics, back stabbing, racial insensitivity, and intolerance in Peninsula Malaysia. She recalled her two-year stay in Peninsula Malaysia as a student in an all-Malay institution where she did her matriculation program before leaving for the U.S. for her undergraduate studies. “During my stay there in Peninsula, people are concerned about who you are, what race you are, what religion you are, what language you speak. People are very concerned of that. For me, I don’t think it should be a criterion that defines who you are or what you are capable of,” she said. She added how

even the Chinese man at the market once asked for her race because she did not look Chinese enough or Malay enough. When he asked her, “What kind of race are you?” she immediately replied “I am Sabahan.” This is the identity that Jay had come to profess. She added, “If people ask me, I would say I am from Malaysia. But if they ask ‘Who are you?’ I would say I am Sabahan,” she added. When I enquired why, she said that the Sabahans are “pretty chill over there because people don’t really care or mind.” Furthermore, she said, “Being a Sabahan, it doesn’t mean anything. Even if you have the *Bumiputera* thing, it doesn’t mean anything. .. We always got classified as *lain-lain* (others).”

The above accounts have indicated thus far how the identities of the four students in this study were shaped differently, depending on their diverse homes, school and classroom experiences, and how all these were brought together to bear on the larger social context. They show how they responded to certain circumstances, and negotiated and transformed their identities accordingly. They also indicate how their attitudes and perceptions on issues related to ethnic, national, and global identities have shaped and have been reshaped by their social environment. All these instances point to one thing: the existence of flexible identities among them that had taken place irrespective of their ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds, and schooling experiences.

In the upcoming section, I have explored the nature of these flexibilities in order to understand the development of the students’ multiple identities, in relation to the English language.

Flexible Identities

The flexibilities in the identities of the four students in this study are the result of two very different aspirations: the desire to gain social mobility, and the desire to “discover” and regain an identity lost or partially lost. The first phenomenon is found in Azura and Ani, the two Malay student participants, who showed great interest in learning to speak English, with a penchant to achieve an elite status. This is a flexibility that is rooted more in social mobility and liberal cosmopolitanism. The second form is seen in Jay and Sarah who had high English language proficiency but who now show an interest in certain aspects of their identity.

Social Mobility

Before I explore the notion of the flexible identity that is evident in Azura and Ani, it is necessary to look back at how the Malaysian Federal Constitution defines someone from that community, the Malays. The Constitution defines a Malay as someone who speaks Malay, follows the cultural practices, and professes Islam as the religion. This definition of what Malays are and what they should do stipulates the fact that their identities are fixed and not something that can be transformed. Identities are always said to be permeable and something that is bound contextually. However, in this case the Malay identity is seen as something permanent. Certain historical reasons can be given to explain this.

During the colonial period, and even long before that, the then Malaya was a conglomerate of various nationalities who came from all over the world for trade, and they spoke at least a hundred languages but soon accepted Malay that was predominantly spoken in the region. During this time, the indigenous Malay population saw a need to distinguish themselves

from the others; later under British rule, they saw a greater need to do this with the growing Chinese and Indian immigrant population. During the years leading to independence, the Malays saw a further need to install certain symbols as identity markers to reinstate their position in the country. Two of these symbols were the Malay language and Islamic religion. Up to today, this group of people, the Malays, have identified themselves in terms of their language and religion. Azura and Ani's flexible identities that were evident from their stories indicate that on occasions, they had stepped out of the national definition that had been ascribed to them. A further exploration of their identities, however, shows this happening only in the issue of language. Their ethnicity as Malays and their religion being Islam are still non-negotiable aspects of their identity.

In the beginning chapters, I mentioned how both Azura and Ani showed instances of resistance and indifference; they looked at English as another school academic subject, it was a subject that needed high grades to pursue their studies abroad, and thought that those who possess it are "modern" and "show-offs," who look at the non-speakers in a condescending manner. They saw these elite students, who came from affluent homes, standing out in all aspects of schooling, and often liked by the teachers, even though not always by the other students. Azura and Ani looked at them with awe and admiration but these feelings stopped there, at least at the primary and secondary levels.

At the tertiary level, having constructed some of their prior identities of themselves as Malay students who only speak Malay, they wanted to acquire some of the elitism too. Thus, a gradual change occurred in both of them. From an initial position of resisting English, later they began to take steps to acquire as much proficiency as possible. This happened more in Ani than in Azura. In the case of Ani, the younger of the two, she also wanted to acquire a Western accent

in her speech. This, for her, was a sign of social class and showed the others that they have come from good schools. This fascination for a “non-Malay” way of speaking English is an interesting feature in her identity that she only acquired during her years of study in the U.S. Azura, on the other hand, a mother of five children who also lived with her in the U.S. at the time of her pursuing her doctorate degree, is currently showing more interest in the kind of identity that she can give her children in the future as English language speakers. If during her childhood, Malay was the only language used at home, today for her children she hopes to see English playing a bigger role. She wanted them to be better than her in this aspect because she still feels that she had not acquired as much English competency as she would like to. Ani, on the other hand, exuberates a lot of confidence in herself in speaking in English, especially in the U.S. context, where a few of her American friends have complimented on her language. At times, in the process of acquiring social mobility and economic prosperity, some people might willingly or unwillingly forsake certain aspects of their identity. Ani, on the other hand, had maintained her strong ethnic, cultural, religious, and national identity; however, her flexible identity now has made her come to accept that a person’s sense of nationalism and national identity need not be tied to the land or to particular identity markers such as language. There is an understanding and acceptance in her that families might vary in their conceptions of cultural, ethnic, and national identities. This shows further flexibility in her identity. Thus, for both Azura and Ani, acquiring the English language was a pathway to obtain the kind of social status that they saw years ago among their elite Malay friends in school. In the case of Azura, she feels that her children are speaking better than “them,” which indicates the intensity in which importance is being given to acquiring English language. Such are the big shifts in identity that had gradually taken place among these two students.

Tensions and complications sometimes arise in the process of identity transformation. This might be the case if the transformation involved are major shifts that are easily identifiable by others. I mention the notion of 'identifiable' in this case because the Malays are highly culturally-bound, and any actions taken must be done with the community in mind. Thus, if a particular transformation in a Malay is immediately visible to the others, such as in choosing to speak a different language other than Malay, and in performing certain religious practices differently, it could be a reason for tensions and conflicts. How will the community look at someone who uses more English while keeping intact all the other aspects of identities? How will this be perceived by the other community members?

According to Azura, a contradictory shift is now taking place in her community. On one side, people still look down when another member speaks a lot in English instead of using Malay. But these days, she said, people also like it when they see another person possess English language proficiency. When I heard Azura say this, it gave me the impression that what is expected by the community is for a person to be savvy of the global needs but at the same time to not appear aloof and distant because of English language proficiency. This shift in thinking was also evident when Ani said that lately she was requested by one of her family members living close to her house to help expose her young children to the English language. Such thinking among the community members were unheard of in the past. Such identity transformation that had gradually occurred in Azura and Ani is not only found at their level, but is also something that is gradually taking hold on the community as a whole. In these students' case, this change was very gradual and took years; thus, one has to wonder how long it will take at the community level, especially with the presence of the still strong Malay nationalists who continue resisting the dominance of English language over Malay.

“Rediscovery” of Cultural Heritage

Jay, in her current position in the U.S., is showing a keen interest to "rediscover" her native ethnic language and to find out more about the legends surrounding her tribe as her ancestors moved to what would later be their permanent home in Northern Borneo. While she takes pride in what modernity has given her, there is a sense of cultural loss in her that only became evident in the latter part of my interviews with her. She wonders why her elders did not expose her to the Kadazan language or tell her all the rich legends that were usually told by the elders. Her keen interest to know all this shows in the way she started to read more and think more about such issues. This interest became evident to me in the way she began to tell me so passionately about attending the next *Nunuk Ragang* festival. Jay also showed exasperation at the gradual loss of Chinese language in her life, from the time that English began to be a dominant discourse. Jay's sense of identification with her culture and language, at a later part in her life, has led her to struggle in balancing different facets of her identity; as a person with a western outlook who has accepted English, as a Malaysian bound by a national language, and as a person with an intense desire to know her roots.

The strong interest that Jay expressed to find out more about her cultural background was also expressed by Sarah, the Indian student participant. She showed a keen interest in the history and roots of the Malaysian Indians, and the Indian legends and mythologies, such as Ramayana. The similarities between Jay and Sarah stops here. Unlike Jay who is consciously seeking to find out more about herself, Sarah aspires to do her searches only in the future. She has a lot of questions about her multiple Indian lineages that even included some Chinese blood in the distant past. Not knowing much about all these, she is certainly interested to seek information

about all these in the future. I wondered secretly if her current position in the U.S. could have been instrumental in creating an interest in her to find out more about her family history. If Jay only sees herself more as a Sabahan, in the case of Sarah she prefers to call herself a Malaysian first, then as an Indian. This became evident through some of her school encounters.

One such incident occurred in Sarah's secondary school. On that day, she was approached by a group of Tamil-speaking Indian students. She immediately responded to their Tamil saying truthfully that she could not speak the language. Later, to prevent further questions, she said that she is "mixed." During one of my interviews with Sarah, she mentioned her wish that she knew Tamil well enough to have talked to those students on that day, but she also quickly added that she never took the time to learn it and that she never did have much feelings for it. In this instance, her interest was more to discover about her ethnic roots rather than to learn her native language. Probably this could be because she had multiple Indian languages in her circle and she did not have a particular inclination for any of them. Interestingly, Sarah preferred to have a wider global identity rather than be bound by ethnic or nationalistic concerns. She has no sense of home in the same way that Jay, Azura or Ani have. According to her, her home could be anywhere as long as her loved ones are there. She will not be defined by physical boundaries or by birth sentiments.

In looking at the flexible manner in which the four participants in this study constructed and reconstructed their identities, I noted a common feature among them. All of them, in some ways, no matter how globalized they have strived to be by acquiring English language proficiency, seem to be firmly tied to their roots, wherever they think their roots are. For Azura and Ani, without question, it is firmly tied to Malaysia. Sarah mentioned that her home is

wherever her parents are, which puts her roots, at least for the time being, in Malaysia where they are currently residing. As for Jay, of Sino-Kadazan heritage, her roots are firmly set as a Sabahan rather than as a Malaysian. All these students, with their roots firmly rooted in Malaysia in various degrees of intensity, have expressed their preference to retain this distinct identity particularly in the way they speak. They want to do this using “*Manglish*” or the Malaysian way of speaking English.

Manglish and Malaysian Identity

According to Baskaran (1994), Malaysian English, or the colloquial way in which the language is spoken, is firmly established as one of the “New Englishes” in Malaysia. These variances have gradually occurred due to influences from the local languages and modifications that had occurred through over-generalization, simplification, omission, and addition of lexis, phonological features, and syntactic features. Similar to other parts of the world where English has evolved, Malaysian English has also evolved from the standard form to meet the needs of the local population. To a native English speaker, this form will seem a non-standard way that does not have any fixed structures, but a careful analysis of the speech patterns shows some governing rules.

In Table 5 below, I show the three levels of *Manglish*, the Acrolect, Mesolect, and Basilect forms, with an explanation of the situations where they are used, and how they are perceived in terms of their legibility.

Table 5

**The Malaysian English Social Dialects
(Adapted from Baskaran, 1994, p. 29)**

English varieties	Usage	Legibility
Acrolect	Official Malaysian English used in formal and educational settings	Internationally intelligible
Mesolect	Unofficial Malaysian English used in semiformal and casual situations	Largely intelligible to non-Malaysians
Basilect	‘Broken Malaysian English’ or ‘half-past six English’ used in informal situations	Internationally unintelligible

This variety of speech in Malaysia sometimes is also used to identify a person’s social status and educational level. While using it to maintain a Malaysian identity in order not to appear snobbish, too much of it could also make one a laughing stock. In English-speaking homes such as Sarah's, *Manglish* is occasionally used but this is something that is done very naturally, and nobody would laugh at it. However, in some other situations, one’s usage of *Manglish* could be a reason to downplay a person’s image and intelligence.

Some people think that *Manglish* is low standard English, but at the grass roots level, and even among the educated people such as the students in this study, it continues to be used. According to Rajadurai (2004), speaking in this manner leads to a “growing sense of pride and

affinity,” since one’s strong identity as a Malaysian is evident here. This pride and affinity is particularly made stronger by the fact that *Manglish* is a truly Malaysianized form, not bound to any one particular ethnic group or speech community in Malaysia (Thirusanku and Yunus, 2012). In using *Manglish*, there is also no necessity to speak like a native English speaker, and hence the issue of social class can be completely eliminated.

The student participants’ preference to speak *Manglish* at home, even though it is not the standard form, is due to various reasons. For Jay and Sarah, it is to downplay their foreign accent and high English proficiency, especially when speaking with someone of a lower proficiency level. In the case of Azura and Ani, their purpose is so that they will not stand out in their community. Not speaking in this way might be perceived by the others as a sign of arrogance and show off. Sometimes it also eases the tension in tense situations. Speaking *Manglish* enables a person to blend in with the rest, showing a Malaysian identity while still showing that they do have some English language knowledge. Showing this knowledge is also important because it is an indication of their social status. For Sarah, her foreign language would come in handy when she wants to get something done, and *Manglish* is useful if she does not want the other person to feel that she is downplaying them. Azura prefers to switch her identities to “match” whomever she is talking to. Thus, to avoid from appearing that she is showing off, she prefers to talk in a “very *rojak*” manner.

Discussion

The phenomenon of flexible identities found among the students, based on their English language acquisition and their self-identities, has raised a few important issues. Is the greater

acquisition and acceptance of the English language in Malaysia, among some of the population, synonymous to a loss or shift in the importance placed on the national and native languages? With such a shift in the importance placed on the languages in the country, should one of it continue being upheld over the others as the national language? The question raised by one of the students in this study, and lately by a few people in Malaysia as well, is why the role of the national language cannot be played by the English language. The rationale for this is that it is a more neutral language than the Malay language since it belongs to only one ethnic group. Can English language, then, play a more unifying role than Malay?

The current situation can be seen in Malaysia whereby the imposition of the Malay language in the education system has created certain schools with more Malay identity, while others struggle to retain their vernacular identities. Some, in favor of this system, call this a national agenda to create a Malaysian society in which all students attend the same school, learning mainly Malay and other languages, if so desired under special conditions. Others, particularly the non-Malays criticize this increasing ethnic polarization, citing the importance of cultural preservation. Thus, many today, have refused the national schools that have monolingual and monoethnic identity, particularly since these schools, lately, are also increasingly leaning towards a particular religious identity. This, too, has become a factor for questions to arise about the languages imposed by the government under its nationalistic agenda.

According to Malaysian academician and poet Joned (1994), “In the present state of affairs, English is perhaps a better medium of integration, certainly among middle and lower middle class Malaysians, than even the National language. Why? Because it is not identified with any particular ethnic group” (p. 58). He questioned why we should regret having more than one

lingua franca. He also mentioned that English is part of our colonial inheritance, and that we should strive “to make this inheritance whole and healthy again, and to undo the damage done to it ...by fanatical nationalistic enthusiasms,” (p. 63). Interestingly some of the coffee shop talks around the country often revolve around some of the national language fanatics’ stronghold on the language, particularly in the Peninsula Malaysia, but how their own children are often sent overseas to acquire as much English as possible. Such criticisms are usually hurled at the nationalists elites and politicians.

Is the increased preference for English language education leading to a loss in native language? In this aspect, two trends are noticeable in Malaysia. One, shows how the loss of one’s language is becoming a reality. Jay, the Sino-Kadazan student from Sabah, has been losing a major part of her Chinese language heritage gradually since English began to take a major role in her life. This happened unconsciously at a time when she left the Chinese vernacular school to enter an elite secondary school.

Another trend shows this language replacement taking place consciously at the community level. Mukherjee and David (2011), reported a particular shift among a few of the speech communities among the Indian immigrant population in Malaysia. They noted a significant rise in the use of English as a language of communication at home, as compared to Indian languages such as Tamil. In such settings, both languages are used with ease. On the other hand, in some families, such as Sarah’s, the Indian language has been completely replaced by English. In some of the cases reported by Mukherjee and David (2011), it is merely a shift; thus it is a condition where home languages are alternated between English and those languages in the homes and in public arenas. The reasons given for such decisions, conscious or otherwise, are

economic gain and status. In these diverse Indian communities in Malaysia, on the other hand, there was such strong grip on the home language. Thus, native languages were not seen as the only factors that lead to the ethnic group's identity, but also other aspects such as customs and traditions. Among this diverse group of Indian people, just as in Sarah's family, there is a great deal of tolerance for "mixed language" and "mixed identity." Some of them profess a global identity more than that of an Indian.

The multiple case studies reported by Mukherjee and David (2011) show how among the non-Malays, there is a strong tendency to shift their linguistic practices to suit their local needs. But this is not the case with the Malays, as seen from the narratives obtained in this study. Only Ani mentioned that language did not necessarily need to be an ethnic group's identity. According to her, a Malay can be born and brought up outside Malaysia and still say that she/he is from that country. However, when it comes to her, Ani has strong sentiments for the Malay language in her own life.

This marks how national and ethnic identities are negotiated and transformed differently, while still professing to be Malaysian. Thus, we see young Malaysians who profess global citizenship without having the notion of belonging to any one place. This change is evident at the ground level. In spite of how the top-down policies take shape in the Malaysian context, students at the ground level have already started feeling the urgent need and pressure to master English because it is the language of knowledge. They want to be able to do this without threats and labeling that mark them as being unpatriotic to the nation and to the national language, Malay. They show a desire to partake in the richness accorded by both the local and the global, without, however, losing their identity.

Conclusion

Malaysian students are obtaining different types of experiences from the various schools around the country. These differences are caused by various factors, such as the location of the school and the overall school culture. A common centralized English language curriculum is used throughout the nation for the entire schooling system. While this can create uniformity in the type of education that is provided to all the students, it is widening the educational gap. Some students get the opportunity to use English in their schools, homes, and neighborhoods. On the other hand, some schools do not provide as much exposure to the language, and students, too, may not get as much exposure from their homes and the surrounding environment. This situation increasingly widens the language proficiency among the different students around the country.

In the Malaysian context, language issues are highly sensitive and are always related to issues of national identity and patriotism since such issues always gets politicized. This often creates tensions and conflicts in the minds of students as they navigate around these issues at the local level while also struggling to obtain the English proficiency needed for success at the global level. Due to the importance accorded to English at the global level, language issues should not be highly politicized, especially that of labeling a person's particular choice of language as an unpatriotic act. Instead of politicizing such issues at the top level, it might be more beneficial to listen to students' stories about their learning and their concerns in attaining a global proficiency.

In the following final chapter, I have summarized the findings obtained from this study, looked into the pedagogical impact, and finally self-reflecting on some aspects of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Of Imaginings Far and Near

In Chapter 1, I mentioned about Chef Huang, who *sambalized* himself and acquired the kinds of identities that gave him a Malaysian identity. In this study, I looked at the lived experiences of four diverse Malaysian students who had to navigate their identities as well, similar to Chef Huang, as they strived to balance their core self-identities and their ethnic, national, and global identities. This study showed the kind of transformations that they underwent as they journeyed on a path that took them to become proficient English language speakers and users. These students who came from different ethnic groups, home backgrounds, and types of school, faced various challenges in positioning English language in their lives. This study looked at such struggles, and at how in the process of overcoming them, they constructed their identities in ways that led them to local and global success. For some of these students, their journeys led them to embrace a new global identity, with English at its center. For other students, this center kept shifting as they indulged in newer cultural journeys rarely envisioned in the past. And yet for some, it involved continuous contestations and negotiations as they struggled with the overlapping issues of ethnic, national, global, and religious identities.

Summary of Study

In the second and third chapters in this study, after an introduction to the study, I first sought to find out how students' perceptions and attitudes towards their English language learning and usage were shaped differently by their various home backgrounds, and school and class settings. I looked at how certain schools, that had retained its globalized educational

system in Malaysia, had continued their strong associations with English, while others have acquired a more Malay identity, in line with the nationalistic agenda. These strong associations were also reflected at the classroom level. Some of the players in these schools and classrooms have particular identities of their own that also played a role in shaping students' identities. Using some of the stories narrated to me by the students, I have traced how these processes took place.

Next, I explored more of the students' stories based on their classroom experiences to see how their identities were further impacted and transformed. I looked at these classrooms as important sites where questions about identities arise, leading students either to resist or to accept the demands that are made of them. Feelings such as resistance, fear, and indifference were revealed from these students' multiple experiences. I showed the emergence of two trends among students in the way their identities were shaped based on their classroom experiences: the existence of cultural resistance among the Malays that hindered their English language learning, and an overall acceptance of English for global participation.

In the third chapter, I explored the students' experiences with the English language outside their home and school settings. Here, I juxtaposed the students' individual experiences with the social context. I attempted to see how their home, school, classroom environments, and out-of-school interactions had impacted their self-identities. The study revealed that this process had taken shape in two different ways; first, there was a type of flexibility among some of the students that made them embrace English as a tool to achieve social mobility; secondly, there was also another type of flexibility that propelled some of them to take a journey inwards to uncover particular aspects of their cultural heritage, that in the past had remained hidden. In the

midst of these differing identities, I also showed in this chapter students' various attempts to hold steadfast to their Malaysian identity, through the use of Malaysian English or *Manglish*. They indulge in various inward reflections about their identities surrounding their ethnicity, languages, and the nation, this is an identity that they will not forgo.

Discussion

Is today's English language education in Malaysia a battle between the elites and non-elites, or between the nationalists and the globalists? Arokiasamay (2010) rightfully does not think that the current preoccupation is one related to elites and non-elites, but is instead related to the aspirations of the globalists. He mentioned four distinct periods that have shaped Malaysian higher education: *Education for Elites* (pre-1970), *Education for Affirmative Action* (1970 – 1990), *Education as and for Business* (1990 – 2000), and *Education for Global Competition* (2000 until now). He mentioned how at one time there was only one university that provided tertiary education through a nationalized system. But today, more institutions are functioning with a focus on English, despite the national policies in the country that has heralded Malay as the main language.

One could argue that the Malaysian government was forced to adopt this liberalized educational environment in preparation for the globalized world and to institute Malaysia as an educational hub in the region. This greatly attracted many international students into the region who were interested in the kind of education that was provided in the global language of trade and economy, English. Malaysia's current liberalized educational system saw a drastic increase in the number of international students between 1996 and 2003. Between 1997 and 2000, this

was a 36.8 % year-on-year growth.¹⁵ This shows the important position that Malaysia, through its various private institutions, accorded to English, despite its official position as the second language. A national-based education was attracting one segment of the population, while on another side, internationalized education, with a high focus on English language, was attracting another. This latter kind of education, while attracting many from around the world, is currently also sought by many Malaysians, and is attracting even the most nationalist Malays. Today, Malaysians from all walks of life have been led to believe that the English language is the gateway to attain social and economic mobility, especially with employers in the region who seek English language proficiency. Even local firms are seeking to internationalize their business outlook, as Malaysia is being swarmed by global trotters, some of whom are here on a long term basis for employment and educational purposes. Yet, of course, others continue to disagree with this model.

The current battle in Malaysia between the nationalists and the globalists is one that, in my opinion, needs to be resolved soon because of the great impact that each has on shaping students' identities. The aggressive nationalistic educational policies put forward by the government beginning in the 1970s promoted a monolingual, monoethnic, monocultural, and mono-religious school system. Today, these Malayanized schools' have almost attained a race-based identity. These schools continuously seek to make their programs more "national," however, the trend towards global skills and to uphold other cultural identities have made many seek other types of schooling experiences. Student identity shifts, as shown in this study, thus, indicates a change in aspirations to acquire social mobility through English, while at the same

¹⁵ Arokiasamy, A. R. A. (2010). The impact of globalization on higher education in Malaysia. <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/waoe/aroka.pdf> Accessed 2 March 2014.

time, for some of them at least, to discover a different and previously unexplored cultural heritage. This trend shows how the top-down approach of the government is being sidelined by many for other options, in order to attain their goals for economic success and cultural preservation. What is imperative, however, in the debates between the nationalists and the globalists, is that student learning remain front and center. Students' learning, as particularly seen in the PPSMI educational policy, in which English language was reintroduced and then retracted in the teaching of math and science, can be of no great help to students. Short-term policies such as this cause a lot of tensions and conflicts, not just for students, but also for the teachers who lack specialized language proficiency and who are now forced to teach the subjects in English.

The Malays are bound by what is sometimes known as the "Malay Mindset," in which every one of their actions is bound by culturally-bound societal expectations. Apart from this cultural identity imposed by the community and reinforced by the state policy, their identity has also been carved by the Malaysia Federal Constitution that has defined Malays as those who are ethnic Malays, speak the Malay language, and profess Islam as their religion. Within this constrained identity, a group of Malays have managed to attain a more modern outlook and to publicly declare English as one of their home languages. They have also managed to transform some of their ways of living, within the bounds of the cultural expectations placed by the community as a whole. On the other hand, some, like Azura and Ani, have had a harder time to adapt their identities accordingly, due to family and environmental pressures. It was harder for them, especially in the initial stages of their schooling, to use as much English, while living in a Malay neighborhood, and studying in a Malayanized school setting. English might be the second most important language in the country but in these students' daily lives, it was pushed further back and remained an academic subject.

This situation has set among the Malays a widening gap between the urban and the rural, the elite and the non-elite, and the English speakers and non-English speakers. Debates on how much importance should be placed in the teaching of English keeps on taking place in the social realm, while at the local level, in schools and classrooms, students cringe with the linguistic disparities that they see around them. Social capital has allowed some to gain more of the language skills that is needed for global success, as in Sarah. On the other hand, in a few other students it remains in the background for a great part of their schooling and the eventual problems caused by a lack of. certain identity changes had to occur for them to overcome such issues. Thus, while one small segment of the Malaysian population continues to excel in their language proficiency right from the beginning, a major segment need to pick up at a later stage in their schooling lives, in spite of it being introduced in schools at Standard 1 level (age seven). This is not an advantageous situation for many students.

Gill et al (2010) have posed some interesting thoughts to ponder, in this respect. They have put forward the idea if it is possible for the public schools to be given the freedom to choose their own medium of instruction, something that they feel would be advantageous to them. They rationalize these thoughts by saying that the government has already liberalized education in the private sectors, and the international schools are already using English as the medium of instruction. “How does a nation decide on what is best for its people and for the long-term development of the country--how does it balance between the needs of linguistic nationalism and that of development-oriented nationalism?” they asked (Gill et al, 2010, p. 202).

Malaysia is currently propelling itself to achieve the status of a developed nation, with its national ideology *Vision 2020* as a guide. For this to happen, as mentioned by Gill and her

colleagues (2010), there is an increasing need to put English language education back into the public schools. In the face of the pressures for increasing liberalization of education in Malaysia, this seems like an appropriate way to think about the direction of its educational system. But just like these authors, I, too, think that more is needed in this area than just lip-service. Attention to the ways in which people imagine and perform their various and intersecting identities is needed by teachers and leaders, if language policy is to be anything more than a tool for increasing social inequality.

Pedagogical Implications

The connotation of what it means to be a student of the English language in Malaysia involves multiple layers of complexities. Amidst such complexities, it is necessary to go beyond teaching rigid language structures that are handed down by the top-down educational system in Malaysia with a strictly timeline to adhere to. Perhaps it is now necessary for language teachers and policy makers also to take note of the differences in the complexities that exist in students' minds that necessitate them to undergo various identity shifts and transformations in the process of learning the language.

It is necessary for teachers to be conscious of the sociocultural factors that go into teaching the English language, especially in a multilingual and multiethnic country such as Malaysia. Teacher education programs can play a big role in this. Norrizan Razali (1992) has come up with a good recommendation in this area. According to him, sociolinguistic courses should be included as part of the training curriculum in order to prepare prospective ESL teachers with the kind of sociolinguistic awareness that is necessary for their future teaching

encounters. It is insufficient to rely on teaching methodologies and teaching resources alone in their teaching. According to him, there is an urgent need for them to be versatile and resourceful as well to help students. Among the many things that ESL teachers have to do in the Malaysian context is thus, to create a desire for internal motivation, narrowing down social distance and home or community differences, and putting aside stereotypes in order to facilitate effective English language learning. Most of the teacher education programs in Malaysia prescribe teaching methodologies, techniques, strategies, or what should go on in the classroom during instruction. However, citing the case of a doctor who prescribes medication without knowledge of the patient's medical history, Norrizan Razali (1992) argued that prescribing a method or a technique for ESL teaching in the Malaysian classrooms is ineffective.

The students' narratives in this study have indicated all the possible areas where their English language learning and usage of the language can be hindered. A knowledge of the sociolinguistic aspects of teaching English to different types of students is useful, particularly to help students who enter school and classroom settings with certain cultural inhibitions. A knowledge of the cultural factors that exist in the students' lives beyond the classroom is thus necessary. This is because in many of the English language classes in Malaysia, the element of social connection is often found to be missing. Certain aspects from society in the social realm such as culture, tradition, religion and so forth have the potential to provide good contexts for effective language teaching. Teachers' attitudes and inclinations towards making cultural connections, has the potential to enhance students' interests and voluntary participation in the classroom setting. In this way, it is also possible to understand further the cultural factors that impede students' communication and that lead to resistance to using the language, in and outside classroom settings.

These ideas are also supported by Kim (2003), who recommended that there should be an understanding of students' struggles in learning the English language. It should not just revolve around the difficulties in the classroom, but should also be concerned about an awareness of how sociocultural meanings are linked in complicated ways to sociocultural identities. English teachers in Malaysia often vent their frustrations in school staff rooms and in meeting venues, about students' lack of practice in English outside the classroom. Teachers should strive to understand the problems encountered by students, particularly that of resistance, and use this knowledge to develop and organize pedagogical approaches as appropriate. Thus, teachers should be cognizant of students' home backgrounds since culture is not a factor that is always recognized in the school and classroom settings.

Research shows the importance of recognizing the socially constructed nature of classroom interactions. In these settings, students' cultural preferences should be taken into consideration. Teachers should consciously pose questions to students and assign them particular roles that will shape them to be more confident in their participation. Apart from that, students' home and cultural resources should be an integral part of classroom teaching. Strategies that assist or scaffold discussions need to be put in place that facilitate participation from everyone, instead of just allowing the conversation to be monopolized by the few who have the language ability and the confidence to speak proficiently. All of this can only happen if teachers begin to look beyond their curriculum and inquire into their students' minds, in order to understand certain language inhibitions that otherwise might not become apparent. In the Malaysian setting, such inquiries are immensely important, because they help in revealing the multiple complexities, richness, tensions, contradictions, and transformations that are involved in the

students' minds. A knowledge of all these is important because these are the factors that go into encouraging or impeding language learning.

Based on what the student participants in this study have reported during my interviews with them, I often wonder if *Manglish* can be put to use in the formal teaching of English to these students. The four student participants mentioned their great affinity towards *Manglish*, and specifically how they still continue to use it in many situations in Malaysia. Perhaps since students continue to hesitate when speaking in class, due to fear of having to be grammatically correct, *Manglish* can be a good tool to start with, at least part of the time. This can increase the comfort level of some of the students who continuously show resistance to certain classroom policies, and who are also uncomfortable in using English in front of the few who come from English-speaking backgrounds. By allowing the different variants of *Manglish* to be used in class, probably their comfort level could be raised. It can be hoped that by doing this, students' initial self-doubts and hesistance can be gradually removed. Students can be told of the three distinct versions in the way *Manglish* is spoken, and the different associations they have in terms of status and relevance of use in everyday life. This might be a way to encourage more usage of *Manglish* among them, especially among students who initially show a lot of resistance to the language. Using this as a beginning, could they then be led on to acquire the standard version and also continue learning the curriculum units?

Personal Reflections

Now that I have come to the end of my study, I feel as though my narrative journey has just begun. I find myself left with more questions than I started with. I began this study with Chef Huang's culinary journey that in the end made him *sambalized* and attain a Malaysian

identity. In the case of Chef Huang, at least there was a clearcut happy ending. In my story and that of the students who participated in this study, no such endings are in sight yet, for there are constant questions, at least in some of us, about the meaning that should be attached to issues of nationalistic identities, and the role played by English and the local languages in this aspect.

I started this study with a few questions, and I am ending it with more questions about the issues of identities, mine as well as those of my participants. All the participants are now back home, with the exception of Jay. How are they coping now in the Malaysian setting after many years of being abroad? I wonder about all the new ventures they might have undertaken with their newly acquired identities. Did they have to construct their identities further to fit their global identity to the local setting? If they did, why and how did the processes take place? Has *Manglish* acquired different meanings in their lives now? As questions such as these run in my head, I also think of the haze-shrouded land that I have now returned to that has become increasingly ethnicized and politicized, more than what I knew of in the past. This haze issue will eventually go off, it always does. On the other hand, it seems as though the ethnic issues and the ensuing politics involving nationalism are here to stay. With this, the debates surrounding English language education might still continue raising its head.

The narrative inquiry methodology that I used to conduct this study has given me the opportunity to develop my passion in what I have been interested in for a very long time: stories. When I first began this study, I did not think that listening to students' stories and writing about them would be daunting work to do, since I love stories anyway. But then, that was years ago when I was a naïve doctoral student who was still taking classes, and still learning the ways of academic writing. Eventually, I realized that narrative inquiry has more to it than what it looks

like on the surface. Clandinin and Connelly brought into perspective the various elements that go into narrative studies, which were perplexing at first but enriching as I went along.

This task of looking deeper into Malaysian students' lived experiences, involved a combination of various feelings. There were moments of happiness as I listened to the stories narrated to me because it also led me along into my own life as an English language learner in Malaysia. However, analyzing the data and writing about it loomed ahead as daunting tasks for me. How and where should I begin the stories? Should I mix all their stories together, or should I give each one a different chapter? When should the analysis part come in, in each chapter? How much of my voice should be heard in such retellings? These were just a few of the questions that I lived with, day after day, for what seemed like a very long time.

When I got deeper into my writing, I also encountered other types of issues. Some of the participants' narrations were accompanied with long and elaborate descriptions while some others, that were of major significance to me, were narrated using the fewest words possible. This led me to question my own interviewing skills. Maybe my phenomenological interviewing techniques lacked the sharpness that it required, I often thought during my writing. When I went over my fifteen transcripts again and again, I cringed each time when I looked at all the openings that had good possibilities of eliciting rich stories but that I had simply bypassed. This need for specific details did not arise until I began my writing process. Apart from this issue, there was also the constant nagging feeling that my readings up until then were still insufficient. Thus, I kept on searching and reading new materials, and rereading old ones, long after I was told that it was probably enough. But in my mind, it was never enough. I did not have the right vocabulary

or the necessary facts to back up my claims, and hence the search had to be continued for a very long time.

Interestingly, there were times during my literature search, and in-between my writing, when I got caught up with certain historical texts that showed a view of a Malaya long gone, or told narratives of explorers who had once lived in Malaya, or passed through the region. On those days, I read the texts with great passion but eventually had to put them aside for another time, for I did not need that particular information for my research. I still remember the days when I had sat in the university library, down in the basement, wishing that I could just continue my reading, but then the grim reality of dissertation writing would always set in.

In this study, I have recorded and retold the students' stories in a way that I know best, using the current knowledge that I now possess. There is a possibility of my stumbling upon something new in the future; a different understanding, a new data, or a new insight. The telling of this story, and analyzing it in a particular social context, has been a most humbling experience for me because of the realization that there are always many other possibilities, and that at this moment, this is all I am aware of. For this reason, I believe that this reflective journey has to continue, in my future writings or at least in my mind.

APPENDIX

Appendix

In this section, I have included some images to enhance readers' understanding about some of the images and locations mentioned in the chapters. The first image below shows *nasi lemak*, the Malaysian dish described in great length in Chapter 1. Next, there are two images to show the settings in a *kampung* and an oil-palm *estate* in Malaysia.

Figure 3

The Malaysian *Nasi Lemak*



Source : <http://www.seasaltwithfood.com/2010/04/nasi-lemak-with-dried-anchovies-sambal.html> Accessed 28 December 2013

Figure 4

A “*Kampung*” Setting



Source: <http://www.gettingliter.com/2012/12/the-kampung-village-ballot.html>
Accessed 11 March 2014

Figure 5

An Oil-palm Estate



Source : http://mypalmoil.blogspot.com/2011_01_01_archive.html
Accessed 11 March 2014

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