

Critical Thinking, Andragogy and  
Action Research in the PPG 3102 literature program

Institute Pendidikan Guru  
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### *Abstract*

For over 50 years, action research has been used as a methodology for educational practitioners to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum application in higher education practice. This action research study at Institute Pendidikan Guru (IPG) teacher training college Batu Lintang, Sarawak Malaysia used action research to investigate the *Program Pensiswazahan Guru* (teacher degree program) teaching English as a second language degree (PPG TESL degree program) curriculum in order to improve the academic performance of post-graduate course participants. In other words, this action research study identifies the stakeholders' experience and perceptions of the PPG TESL degree program that took place at IPGBKL from January – July 2011 in order to bring about emancipation to the status quo of the PPG literature course for course participants.

### **Introduction**

Action research has gained momentum in Malaysia as a means for teachers to become familiar with and improve classroom reality. Originally collated by Lewin (1946) action research was popularised by Kemmis & McTaggart (in the 1980s); and has strongly been promoted in Malaysia for a method whereby English teachers are able to engage in their own professional development (Hawkins, 2011; Perrett, 2003). In this study, the action research of Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) was adopted because it calls for 'emancipation from the tyranny of the status quo.' In other words, the purpose of action research is not only to improve pedagogical technique but also to construct living theories of social reality for practitioners (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Somekh, 2006) and develop inner knowing that may cause emancipation and upset the status quo from inside these particular working environments to improve outcomes for educational stakeholders (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Chapman, Paterson, & Medves, 2011; Koshy, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2007; Snyder, 2009; Tomal, 2010).

The Malaysian government's aim to become an industrialised nation by 2020 has placed increasing pressure on the Institute Pendidikan Guru (IPG) teachers colleges to train and qualify in-service English teachers with teaching English as a second language degree qualifications (TESL). For instance, in 2011, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) decided to upgrade primary school English teachers to become TESL graduates through the PPG degree qualification program. Institute Pendidikan Guru Kampus, Batu Lintang (IPGKBL) in Kuching, Sarawak Malaysia, is one of the top three English teacher training institutes in Malaysia and it provides the PPG TESL literature qualification program for in-service primary English teachers.

This action research study explores the PPG literature 3102 course at IPG Batu Lintang in order to improve the future academic performance of participants in Madame Suez Pinks English literature classes.

## **The nature of the problem**

At IPGKBL teacher training college, the English literature TSL 3102 is one of the core courses that primary school English teachers must take in order to successfully graduate from the program. In discussions with IPGKBL English lecturers (in November 2011), it became apparent that the majority of TSL 3102 participants were unable to write the critical literature essays required to complete the course successfully.

For example, in November 2011, Madame Suez Pinks English literature TSL 3102 class had twenty-five participants and only two were capable of producing high standard academic papers. Similar results occurred in Madame Hj Kamaria Hj Samsuddin's and Mr. Nyolet Abun's English TSL 3102 literature class (which had a total of 125 participants). With such low levels of academic performance across three different English literature TSL 3102 classes, circumstantial evidence indicated that the current course could be improved to increase participants' essay writing, critical thinking and academic performance.

According to Madame Suez Pink (2012) the purpose of the literature component in the TESL program is to expose participants to the complexities of literature and its importance in teaching English. In addition, the benefits of using literary texts as a means of interactive and imaginative learning, as well as the ability of literary texts to develop emotional and cultural maturity still held sway (Ganakumaran, 2002). It is vital then that the teachers commissioned to teach literature are themselves equipped with the foundational critical skills based on current approaches to literary texts. Therefore, the PPG TESL degree teacher's, must be able to analyse and examine these literary texts before they focus on ways in which they can be used to support their pupils' development of English as a second language.

## **Program delivery**

In March 2012, the English TSL 3102 literature course took place; it adopted a combination of online and intensive weekend study modes. That is, participants were expected to complete self-study components online prior to attending the in-person lectures at IPGKBL in Kuching Sarawak, Malaysia. The course participants' contact time with an IPGKBL lecturer consisted of ten hours of face-to-face classroom instruction per course, each semester. The IPGKBL first semester runs from January to June and semester two runs from July to November each academic year. In contrast, full-time pre-service students at IPGKBL who study the TSL 3102 literature course receive 45 hours of classroom instruction over a single semester. The disparity between the instructional contact time for the full-time pre-service students and the intensive in-service teachers is an issue that will be examined further in this study.

## **Study design**

Section one describes the nature of the problem and introduces the underlying rationale for this investigation (Tomal, 2010). Section two, the literature review, examines English teaching and training in Malaysia and highlights the role that literature can play in developing English proficiency as well as critical thinking skills in participants. Following on from this, section three discusses the traditional views of pedagogy in Asia and proposes that the principles of andragogy be considered as an alternative foundation for adult education and training in Malaysia (Evans, 2012).

Section four defines action research's theoretical assumptions and discusses the methodology and methods that this study used to investigate the PPG TESL literature course at IPGKBL. Section five, data analysis, explores the study findings and pinpoints the study's limitations. Section six provides recommendations for improvements and changes that could have positive ramifications for the future PPG literature program. The section concludes with the implications with respect to further study in Malaysia.

## **Literature Review**

Malaysian education philosophy is geared towards developing individuals who are well balanced intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically as well as equipping them to think critically and creatively. Tan Sri Datuk Wan Mohd, Zaid, then the Director General of the Ministry of Education, (quoted in Low, 1996: v) highlighted the need to create Malaysians who can think critically and creatively, make decisions and solve problems. In other words, the education system deems it essential, and possible, to teach and generate students who are "not only well-informed and well-rounded but also able to think critically and creatively in solving problems and making decisions." Isaksen & Treffinger (1985: 33) describe creative thinking as

Making and communicating connections to: think of many possibilities; think and experience in various ways and use different points of view; think of new and unusual possibilities; and guide in generating and selecting alternatives.

Critical thinking, on the other hand, involves skills such as analysing and creating possibilities to: compare and contrast many ideas; improve and refine ideas; make effective decisions and judgments. Gough (1991) stresses the importance of teaching today's students to think critically:

In the twenty-first century, the ability to engage in careful, reflective thought has been viewed in various ways: as a fundamental characteristic of an educated person, as a requirement for responsible citizenship in a democratic society and more recently, as an employability skill for an increasingly wide range of jobs.

Several authors in the educational literature discuss critical thinking skills in relation to the related phenomena of modern technology and fast-paced change. For instance, Robinson, (1987: 17) argues

Teaching students to become effective thinkers is increasingly recognized as an immediate goal of education...If students are to function successfully in the now highly technical society,

then they must be equipped with lifelong learning and thinking skills necessary to acquire and process information in an ever-changing world.

In the light of this perspective, educators should be aware of the need to ameliorate critical and creative thinking skills throughout the teaching and learning process.

### **The role of literature in English language education**

Tyson (1999) claims literary genres enable creative and critical thinking skills to become part of the teaching-learning process, and this leads to deeper and broader reflections about the human experience and the world of ideas. By engaging with creative interpretation, for example, one tries to explain literary texts, their various elements, cultural production, meanings, design and aesthetics. Such analyses engage with the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism are founded. In literature courses, old concepts or canonised theories are zealously and continuously debated, questioned and modified. This spirit of healthy enquiry not only ensures that literary criticism is constantly extended and developed but it also enables an expansion of critical and creative skills. This study argues that literary texts and textual analysis empower participants to develop and enhance their creative and critical skills.

Interpretation of a text involves exploring the various levels of meaning in a work of literature. A work may have a single meaning, as it had for the author, but it also generates meaning(s) for its first readers, later readers and for us today. In some contexts, to “criticise” may mean to find fault, but for literary studies it means to examine carefully and explore an issue from all sides. Criticism requires one to take a distanced view (examining and exploring) of one’s responses by questioning and testing them. The most valuable criticism of literary texts is not one which finds fault, but one that calls our attention to ideas and concepts derived from the written word.

From this perspective, this researcher is of the opinion that the PPG literature course at IPGKBL does enable participants to create or generate new ideas. One underlying principle of reader response theory (Hirvela, 1996) is that readers actively participate in the creation of meaning when they read a text. A reader does not merely respond to a completed artefact but is involved in its construction. Working with a literary text is an experiential process, and entails meaning formation. Furthermore, the interpretation of a literary text becomes as much the student’s property as the teacher’s (Hirvela, 1996). One of the basic tenets of teaching literature is that it is ‘activity–principled’ and this principle can be achieved through student-centred, creativity-based and process-oriented lessons. Carter (1988) categorised three main approaches to teaching literature: information-based, language-based and personal-based. The personal-based approach aims to encourage readers to respond by connecting literary elements in texts to their own personal experiences. This teaching method is more student-centred than traditional approaches and focuses on the elucidation of individual response and

emphasises the 'explore and discuss' method. This researcher strongly believes that subsequent English literature courses should adopt the principles underlying these approaches.

### **Critical thinking in Literature**

Another of the underlying goals of the national education philosophy of Malaysia is to provide and equip individuals with cognitive knowledge and skills to enable them to differentiate between truth and hearsay, facts and opinions, critical and prejudicial thinking (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia 1982). In the last decade, and perhaps most importantly in today's information age, thinking skills are critical if educated people are to cope with the rapidly changing world. Gough (1991) argued that many educators believe that specific knowledge will not be as important to tomorrow's workers and citizens as the ability to learn and make sense of new information. Throughout history, philosophers, politicians, educators and many others have been concerned with the science of critical thinking.

Thinking skills are necessary tools in societies characterised by rapid change, alternatives of actions as well as numerous individual and collective choices and decisions. The factors that create a need for well-developed thinking skills are only part of the story, however. Another reason that educators, employers and others call for more improved and extensive thinking skills is that, in the main, the majority of students do not demonstrate impressive levels of critical and creative thinking. In other words, developed critical thinking is not a widespread phenomenon. Most students do not score well in tests that measure the ability to recognise assumptions, evaluate arguments and assess inferences.

While the importance of cognitive development has become widely recognised, students' performance in terms of higher-order thinking has revealed a critical need for students to be taught the skills and importance of effective thinking. There is yet another major force behind the call for improved thinking skills. Several commentators in the educational literature are generally agreed that it is in fact possible to increase students' creative and critical thinking capacities through instruction and practice.

There are studies and evaluations supporting the effectiveness of programs that promote the teaching of creative and critical thinking skills and its effects on students' outcomes (Stenberg and Bhana: 1986). A broad, general finding from the research base is that nearly all the thinking skills programs and practices investigated were found to make a positive difference in the achievement levels of participating students. Studies which looked at achievement over time found that instruction in thinking skills accelerated the learning gains of participants, and those with true or quasi-experimental designs generally found that experimental students out-performed controls to a significant degree (Bass & Perkins, 1984). In short, teaching creative and critical thinking enhances academic achievement.

Studies conducted in the United States (Alabama) teacher training college on higher order thinking skills (HOTS) by Crump, Schlichter and Park (1988) also identified a positive relationship between teacher training and student achievement. Their studies show that training teachers to teach creative and critical thinking skills leads to significant gains in student achievement.

Malaysian education is often instrumentally motivated (Ganakumaran, 2002), and the challenge then is to encourage learners to understand that there is real far-reaching value in studying and analysing literary texts. This is a daunting task in a society that has yet to consider education as a means to aesthetic development, self-enrichment and personal growth. A critical appreciation of literary texts does not simply increase students' competency in textual analysis and language proficiency, but leads to their proficiency in critical and creative thinking.

### **Pedagogy & Andragogy in adult education**

Traditionally, pedagogy has focused on the transmission of knowledge, usually from the expert teacher to the student. From this perspective, the student is perceived to be like an empty vessel waiting to be filled up with knowledge and subject mastery. Pedagogy means the “art and science of teaching children” (Taylor & Kroth, 2009) and is positioned as teacher-centric education (Chan, 2010). In the pedagogic approach, the teacher decides what is to be learned, how students are taught, as well as controlling all aspects of power and decision making in the classroom (Chan, 2010; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Typically, the pedagogic classroom advocates methods that highlight teacher expertise, including fact-laden lectures, assigned readings, drills, quizzes, memorisation exercises and examinations (Chan, 2010; Ray & Chu, 2005). Hofstede (1986) claims that Asian cultures prefer this more traditional teacher-centred approach and do not create opportunities for students to ask questions that may challenge the teacher's authority. Ray & Chu (2005: 105) explain:

Taiwan is firmly rooted in the Confucian tradition where students respect teachers as ultimate authority figures whose opinions are not challenged while students sit quietly and learn. Children, students, younger siblings and employees are expected to show respect and obedience to their dyadic counterparts (parents, teachers, elder brother, and superiors).

There are several problems with the pedagogic approach to learning. For example, once students are acculturated to a pedagogic environment where the teacher dominates every nuance of learning, the student develops little sense of personal responsibility for his or her learning outcomes. In a culture of pedagogy the students self-talk may be: “I did well on the assignment because my teacher trained me properly.” And conversely: “I did poorly on my assignment because my teacher did not teach me the skills I needed to learn.” In a culture of pedagogy, adult students also know that they may easily blame their poor academic performance on the teacher for example, the in-service teachers enrolled in the PPG literature 3102 course who did poorly on their essay writing in Madame Suez Pink's class in November 2011 and March 2012, were quick to place the IPGKBL lecturers under scrutiny in order to justify their assessment marks. The IPGKBL participants reliance on the teachers ability demonstrates

an overexposure to the traditional pedagogic form of learning which fails to unlock the students critical thinking or power of analysis.

Interestingly, the PPG literature course appears to illustrate pedagogic values that are adhered to at IPGKBL teacher training college in Malaysia. Here the teacher is deemed responsible for learning outcomes in their classroom, rather than having the focus on the adult participant. As Evans (2012: 18) argues “in Malaysia, the teacher is seen as the ultimate resource of all correct answers, changing hearts and minds and underlying pedagogical values from pedagogy to andragogy is a big ask.” Indeed, the *Sarawak Sun* newspaper (July 2012) article “Brutal truths of the education system” by Dr. Ranjit Singh Malhi strongly argues that:

Our (Malaysian) education system generally promotes surface and passive learning instead of deep and active learning. Our students lack critical and creative thinking skills because our education system promotes conformity and uniformity. Worse still students have been conditioned to be “spoon fed”.

Dr. Singh continues: “What are the desired attributes of our students and graduates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world?” His answer is that Malaysian students and graduates need to be “self-directed, self-reflective and life-long learners.” These are just a few of the necessary skills that will be required of graduates in the future.<sup>1</sup>

The next section will discuss the principles of andragogy as an alternative form of adult education and training in Malaysia.

### **Andragogy: the art and science of helping adults learn**

Andragogy is founded on the assumption that adults learn differently from children and that learning in higher education should use adult’s prior knowledge and life experience as the basis for further learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). The teacher using andragogy tends to focus on learning rather than the simple transmission of facts to be tested in an examination (Ray & Chu, 2005). With andragogy, adult students are seen equals with the teachers, studying and sharing the information necessary to become more self-directed and autonomous in the process of learning (Chan, 2010; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Knowles *et al.*, (1998) explain the key principles of teaching adults via andragogical approaches:

1. adults need to know why they need to learn something;
2. adults are self-directed in their learning;
3. adults have a great deal of experience to bring to education;
4. adults are ready to learn what they need to know;

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<sup>1</sup>The original article contains a forceful argument on the state of higher education in Malaysia. A copy of the article is enclosed in the appendixes.

5. adults consider learning to be life centered; and
6. adults are mostly motivated by internal pressures (rather than external pressures).<sup>2</sup>

As a result, andragogy calls for a paradigm shift in thinking away from teacher as the only expert in the classroom, toward a learner-focussed education where adults are empowered to participate, add value and become equally responsible for the learning outcomes in the classroom (Knowles *et al.*, 1998). Taylor and Kroth (2009) argue that andragogy is designed for learners to become more self-directed than teacher-directed. In Malaysia, the principles of andragogy can be used advantageously to challenge the way courses and modules are taught with the purpose of engaging adult learners in education and training at the IPG campuses. The next section discusses andragogy in a Malaysian context.

### **New approach to professional development**

Dr. Simone Evans (2012), training fellow at ELTC in Kuala Lumpur has worked extensively on developing new models of professional development designed to change the “hearts and minds” (Evans 2012: 19) of Malaysian in-service English teachers. For instance, the RELTmax teacher education & training module designed by ELTC staff puts forward views on current Malaysian teacher education. Evans (2012: 18) and the ELTC team summarise:

It has been the experience of ELTC and of much teacher-training around the world, that cascading models of rolling out training fail, particularly when they are conducted for in-service teachers (Hayes, 2000). Because of this, attempts to ‘teacher-proof’ training so that everyone receives the ‘same’ product or experience defeat the purpose of doing the training aimed at effecting that change (Poulson & Avramidis, 2003). We want teachers to stop Teaching by Telling, so Chalk and Talk is simply not appropriate.

The debate between pedagogy and andragogy sheds light on our participants academic performance in the PPG literature course and appears to highlight the underlying values in curriculum design and course application currently being taught at IPG campuses across Malaysia. According to Evans (2012: 19) the majority of Malaysian in-service teachers cannot “learn theory and apply it; cannot learn by someone ‘telling’ them something; only learn things they can see an immediate need to learn; and will not change their teaching practice until you win their hearts and minds.”

Although there is no such thing as a perfect teaching method in adult education, andragogy provides a solid foundation that gives adults the opportunity to become self-directed and more responsible for their learning throughout higher education; skills that are critical in the professional world.

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<sup>2</sup>This section has been inspired from the work of Dr. Simone Evans (2012) ELTC Training Fellow, my colleague and friend.

## **Methodology**

This section of the paper begins with an overview of the methodology and methods employed in developing an understanding of issues related to the literature TESL degree program. First, the research themes and questions are introduced and the methodological considerations are discussed. Specific reference is made to action research as the theoretical framework that guided this investigation. Second, a rationale for the collection methods is provided and evaluated in the context of the present study. Third, the action research cycles explains the data collection procedure according to the four critical moments: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Then the data analysis section examines approaches that action researchers use to transform raw data into reliable claims to knowledge. The section concludes with a discussion of the ethical procedures this study followed to ensure data was collected in accordance with the academic literature.

### **Research themes**

As the nature of the problem and the literature review have already shown, the following research themes emerged to guide this action research study:

1. How do participants feel we can improve the literature course at IPGKBL?
2. How can the teaching team improve academic performance and essay writing ability of participants in the PPG TESL degree program?

### **Overview of action research**

A brief history of action research indicates that during the 1940's there was only the Lewin (1946) model in the United States. That model was promoted in the United Kingdom by Elliot (1976); and during the 1980's by the Deakin University research group in Australia (Carr, Kemmis, Grundy & McTaggart). Traditionally, the type of action research utilised by researchers was closely related to Lewin's (1946) model and consisted of:

1. Change experiments on real problems in social systems. It focused on a particular problem and sought to provide assistance to the client system;
2. Cycles of identifying a problem, planning, acting and evaluating;
3. Intended change typically involved re-education, a term that refers to changing patterns of thinking and acting that had become entrenched in individuals and groups. Effective re-education depends on participation by clients in diagnosis and fact finding and free choice in order to engage in new kinds of action;
4. Challenges to the status quo from a perspective of democratic values.

Recent trends in education indicate a widespread proliferation of action research and other forms of practitioner enquiry, such as action learning (Miettinen, 2000; Mumford, 2006) and action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1990; Mumford, 2006) that share a similar theoretical foundation of teacher as researcher (Stenhouse, 1975). As a result, practitioners are often confused as to what action research is and which type is suited to investigate classroom practice. Indeed, the problem of locating rigorous action research in the academic literature is pressing, because without a clear definition it is unlikely that practitioners can implement action research effectively in their classroom. Moreover, not all types of action research can be considered valid even though they claim to be under the banner of action research. As McNiff & Whitehead (2010: 26) point out “much of what goes by the name of action research would probably not be recognized by Lewin, Elliot or Whitehead.”

Increasingly, action research terminology has become a mantra of professional development that accommodates a diverse range of educational initiatives without any true understanding of the subversive nature of action research (Brooker & O'Donoghue., 1993; Chapman *et al.*, 2011; Kemmis, 2006). McNiff and Whitehead (2010: 24) argue:

Action research is seen as a panacea which is naïve and dangerous practice. In this sense action research becomes yet another grand theory to be imposed on practitioners from outside, rather than a way of enabling practitioners to generate their own living practice based theories from educational perspective.

Action research is designed to upset the balance of power from within organisations and provide practitioners with a means to influence the status quo by taking action in the present to improve the rationality or social justice of organisational practices (Kemmis, 2006). In other words, action research sheds a critical light on unethical organisational or pedagogical practices from inside organisations (Kemmis, 2006). In fact, even the status quo can be deemed a form of discriminatory practice, as teachers may feel peer pressure to work and teach in ways that conform to conventions and which dominant groups value as “good teaching”. Since action researchers usually explore new or innovative ways of doing in their pedagogy, the research act is inherently political as it threatens the status quo and highlights what constitutes acceptable (positive and negative) teaching practices of teachers inside the organisation.

The next section will define action research's theoretical assumptions and will then outline the specific methodology and methods used to collect data in this study.

### **Definitions of action research**

Action research is undertaken by teachers to investigate their own classroom practices, and the emphasis is on collaborative problem solving with other teachers in classroom environments (Coghlan & Brannick, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2007). McKernan (1991) writes that action research is used to solve practical problems and the practitioners must have control over the process as well as the results

of the research inquiry. Unlike traditional research approaches where an expert is called in from outside the classroom to test a theory on participants, action researchers are personally involved in solving real classroom problems. As a result, action research revolutionises the way knowledge is constructed and it empowers teachers with a methodology that constructs living theory from action practice (McNiff & Whitehead 2010). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 29) argue “[teachers] must be able to describe what we are doing now, we must be able to describe what we are doing informed by theory and we must know how our work is informed and justified by particular educational theories.” Action research builds theory from the ground up, based on the reality of what actually happens in classroom practice. The educational literature identifies six key theoretical assumptions of action research:

1. Action research aims to cause improvement, change and emancipation to the status quo and social justice of learning environments (Chapman *et al.*, 2011; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Tomal, 2010);
2. Action research involves researching your own practice, it is the practitioner who diagnoses a real problem and systematically searches for a solution through a spiral of research cycles (Chapman *et al.*, 2011; Koshy, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2007);
3. Action research is collaborative, participatory and focuses on the co-creation of knowledge of practices (Coghlan & Brannick, 2009; Elliot, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Levin & Merrit, 2006);
4. Action research generates living theories about how learning has improved practice and is informing new practices. These personal theories are also living theories because they change and develop as people change and develop themselves (McNiff & Whitehead 2010);
5. Knowledge generated from action research is socially constructed and cautious in its claims, sensitive to variation and open to reinterpretation in new social contexts. However, findings are widely published for critical peer viewing in order to ensure valid and trustworthy claims to knowledge (Kemmis, 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Somekh, 2006; Winter, 2009);
6. Action research as a scientific approach does not have to justify itself in comparison to other approaches, but rather is evaluated within its own frame of reference. Questions of reliability, replicability and universality do not pertain to the action research approach (Chapman *et al.*, 2011; Coghlan & Brannick, 2009; Kemmis, 2006).

Action researchers understand that action and knowledge are inextricably linked, and by taking action the practitioner will uncover emergent knowledge about a given classroom problem during the study (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988). Therefore, it is not necessary for action researchers to have a predetermined research question as “it is impossible to know the exact nature of the inquiry that will develop (Corey 1949: 519).” In fact, Corey (1949) notes that predetermined research questions and rigid methodological structures must not be treated with too much respect if action researchers are

able to adapt and gain true insight into the emerging situation. Moreover, the action research practitioner does not wait for every nuance of a situation or perfect knowledge to descend upon them before initiating a research investigation, rather they take action understanding that new knowledge and research skills will emerge during the inquiry (Chapman, *et al.*, 2011; Kemmis & McTaggart 1988).

## Methodology

Action research methodology applies systematic cycles of problem solving that consist of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. In cycle one the research team takes action then collaboratively plans, acts, observes and reflects on the data (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 2006). After practitioners have reflected on the actions taken and data in cycle one, the second cycle emerges from the first. That is to say, the question to be addressed in the second cycle of research is not predetermined in any way; the question is unknown initially and emerges inductively from the research cycles (Reason & Bradbury, 2007). In order to be considered valid, action research requires two complete research cycles and is undertaken in collaboration with a research team (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Tomal, 2010). Figure 1 is drawn from Kemmis & McTaggart's (1988) action research spiral:

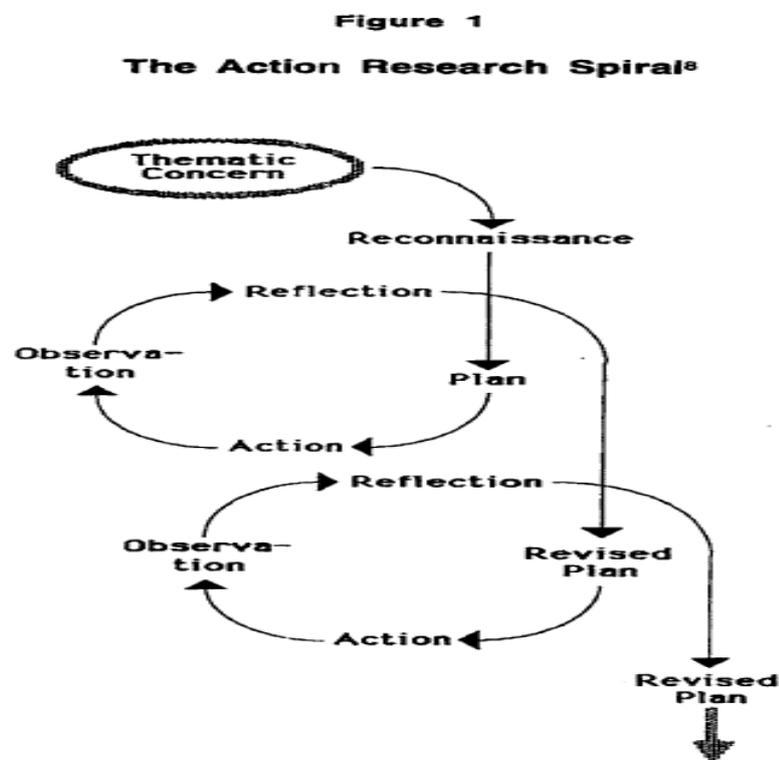


Figure 1: The action research spiral (from Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

The action research spiral enables the research team to visit the phenomenon at a higher level each time, and this facilitates a greater depth of understanding (Koshy, 2010). As practitioners become more proficient with action research, the focus turns to integration of the four critical moments and a forcing of the topic of investigation through a spiral of systematic dialogue and critical reflection (Hawkins, 2011). The systematic spiralling of critical reflections generates learning experience(s) that challenge self-understanding, personal values (ontology) and pedagogical assumptions that ultimately lead to new ways of knowing and doing in andragogy (Somekh, 2006).

## **Methods**

Action researchers may use any mix of methods to uncover participants' interior thoughts and feelings in order to better understand the research situation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). For example, this study employed a reconnaissance survey concomitantly with focus group interviews to collect evidence of the teaching and learning that occurred in Madame Suez Pink's literature class at IPKGBL. The purpose of the reconnaissance survey was to collect background data on participants (age, gender, and teaching experience) and identify their perceptions of the literature course to that point.

Focus groups were selected as the primary collection instrument because they enabled the greatest flexibility to access a large group of participant views and gave respondents the freedom to explore their perceptions together in group discussion without interference or guidance from the research team (Morgan, 2002). Second, focus groups allowed for the research team to develop a comprehensive view of the teaching and learning that occurred in the PPG literature course according to the participants' perceptions of their classroom experience.

The next section will first discuss the research setting and participants' background information and will locate the surveys and focus groups in the academic literature. Second, the methods that researchers use to develop qualitative validity, trustworthy and credible claims to knowledge are examined. Following on from this, the concepts surrounding catalytic validity will be explained to demonstrate how action researchers may have legitimate claims to knowledge in relation to data analysis. Third, the ethical procedures that this study followed will be outlined.

### **Participants and data collection**

In collaboration with Madame Suez Pink, lecturer at IPKGBL, we decided to investigate ways to improve the critical thinking and essay writing of the PPG literature located at Institut Pendidikan Guru Kuching, Sarawak Malaysia. The 29 participants were in-service primary school teachers aged between 21 and 50 years and our reconnaissance survey indicated that the majority of participants had

been outside post-secondary education for at least five years before attending the PPG literature course at IPGKBL.

In this study, the literature course was delivered from January 2012 and July 2012 and there were key moments of data collection. Survey and focus group data were collected fortnightly in the following approximate order:

- Reconnaissance survey: March 2012
- Cycle one: focus group: April 2012
- Cycle two: focus group: May 2012

## **Surveys**

Surveys are one of the most common methods educational researchers use to collect data on the conditions and attributes (educational attainment, ethnicity, age and background) of a particular population at a specific point in time (Bryman, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Several commentators note that survey data can be used to establish cause and affect relationships and determine participants' views of curriculum documents or establish the values of a group of people (Bryman, 2004).

Surveys can be closed, open or mixture of these two types and are used in both qualitative and quantitative research designs. For instance, the closed item survey enables participants to select two or more specific alternatives (yes/no/I don't know) (Berends, 2006; Hawkins, 2011). The open-ended survey creates a structure whereby respondents have freedom to reply and elaborate on responses so that the research team can develop a better understanding of participants thoughts, feelings and views regarding the research topic (Bryman, 2004).

As with every research method, surveys also have limitations in terms of data collection. For example, participants may not wish to answer truthfully and instead answer in a way they think will please the researcher. Without a follow up interview it can be difficult for the research team to determine exactly why a participant elected to answer in a particular way (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2011). In this study, the reconnaissance survey was used to collect general background information about participants and not as a rigorous method of data collection. The next section will discuss focus groups as the main data collection instrument for this study.

## **Focus groups**

For action researchers, focus groups have several advantages as they are cost effective to implement and allow participants' perceptions and feelings to emerge during group discussion without significant researcher interference (Piercy, Franz, Donaldson, & Richard, 2011). Focus groups have been utilised

in educational research to obtain the opinions, values and beliefs from identifiable groups and are particularly useful when engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse populations (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, & Davidson, 2007; Överlien, Aronsson, & Hydén, 2002).

In fact, Piercy *et al.*, (2011: 887) go so far as to say that the “synergistic, snowballing effect of group discussion often results in rich ideas that would be impossible through individual interviews or more quantitative methods.” In other words, focus group participants have the opportunity to build on group conversation, interject and verbalise personal perceptions to the group. In this way, Piercy *et al.*, (2011: 887) continue, “they can build upon each other’s answers, for example someone might say, “Oh, yeah, that happened to me, but for me it was this way”...

The size of focus groups can range from four to 12 participants in each group. They generally discuss an issue around desks or tables (Halcomb *et al.*, 2007; Piercy *et al.*, 2011). Halcomb *et al.*, (2007) note that in Asian cultures desks and tables are welcome props, because they create a physical comfort barrier. In addition, when organising focus groups, the aim is to encourage discussion and not to have the group so large that members become too intimidated to discuss the research topic.

### **Questioning route**

Focus groups tend to follow a questioning route that organises and guides data collection. The questioning route utilises a funnel approach to stimulate discussion with simple introductory questions to initiate group discussion. Then transition questions are used that gradually narrow the focus and lead the discussion towards key questions that represent the core research problem (Halcomb *et al.*, 2007; Överlien *et al.*, 2002). As Halcomb *et al.*, (2007: 1004) point out the questioning route enhances the consistency of data obtained in focus groups and assists in efficient, high quality data analysis.

Table 1 illustrates the questioning route pattern that was adapted from Halcomb *et al.*, (2007); Piercy (2011) during this study’s action research cycles.

Table 1: Questioning route

Opening questions
1. If you can imagine one word to describe the literature course, what would it be?
2. Can you tell us briefly about what has been the most interesting aspect of the literature class so far?
Transition questions
1. How would you describe the module materials for the literature course so far?

2. Can you tell us briefly, what has been the most difficult aspect of the PPG literature class in your experience?
3. What aspects of essay writing have been difficult for you in the literature course?

#### Key questions

4. In your opinion, what has been the main problem with the literature course?
5. What steps can lecturers take to help you write critical essays?
6. What additional kinds of help can lecturers provide to support you in the literature course?
7. Imagine that your best friend is enrolled to take this literature course in 2013 at IPGKBL what advice would you give them to prepare to study the literature course?

#### Ending questions

8. Have we missed anything important?
9. Write a brief summary of the group's thoughts and feelings below

The questioning route is designed to let discussion follow a natural course so that participants share personal opinions, thoughts and feelings that yields high quality data related to the topic under investigation.

### **Focus group limitations**

Focus groups do not have a strong presence in the academic literature and are considered by some to be a relatively new and unreliable research instrument (Wilkinson, 2011). Because of the inherent flexibility in focus groups discussions, the precise motivation for participant responses can be obscure, so the reliability of responses can be called into question (Överlien *et al.*, 2002). Since focus groups are socially interactive and designed to encourage debate, the group's social, cultural and interpersonal dynamics can dramatically influence discussions as well as the validity of the data collected (Piercy *et al.*, 2011). Halcomb (2007) also suggests that the inclusion of extremely dominant participants within a group can produce results that are not reflective of the entire group's perspective, and because other members feel intimidated they may not participate in the discussion.

Several authors also claim that focus group questions must be carefully constructed and culturally sensitive to the group dynamics. In addition, some suggest the questions could be piloted before use in the actual study. Under ideal research conditions, the piloting of focus group questions could occur. However, action research is often undertaken in the "mess" of classroom reality and data collection

methods are usually tested in action practice and become more valid, rigorous and focussed due to the action research spiral.

Cohen & Manen (2007: 166) explain “the social and educational world is a messy place, full of contradictions, richness, complexity, connectedness, conjunctions, and disjunctions. It is multi-layered and not easily susceptible to the atomization process inherent in much numerical research.” Indeed, qualitative researchers tend to focus on words, meaning and the human story behind the situation rather “than atomization of numbers” that have little relevance to understanding human behaviour (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The following section will discuss qualitative notions of validity, reliability, catalytic validity and apply these to the action research paradigm.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Educational researchers seek ways to demonstrate to the wider community that their study findings are authentic, trustworthy, credible, valid and reliable (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010; Piercy *et al.*, 2011). Hammersley (1992: 69) argues “an account is valid or true in both qualitative and quantitative studies if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorize.” Watkins (1991: 5) notes that qualitative researchers should ask two questions: “First, do the researchers mutually observe and measure what they say they are observing and measuring? Second, to what extent are the findings applicable across groups? The first internal validity, is one of the strengths of qualitative methods, while the second, reliability, creates difficulties for the qualitative researcher who is often embedded in the social context.”

Reliability can be described as the ability to reproduce the study findings by following the described methods and methodological procedures (academic recipe) in order to reproduce the results claimed in the study (Reason & Bradbury 2001). Because action research occurs within social contexts, practitioners tend to focus on achieving a high standard of qualitative validity which is designed to encompass quantitative notions of reliability (Hawkins, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Argyris, Putnam *et al.*, (1990: 20) point out:

Knowledge in the service of action (research) cannot rest solely on the analysis of social statistics. It is necessary to get at the meanings embedded in action, at the logic of action. Social statistics are so abstracted from the action (social reality) context that they do not provide a reliable guide to action in particular situations.

### **Catalytic validity**

Koshy (2010) notes that the validity of action research findings is measured according to whether it solves problems and increases participants’ control over their own situation. Action research occurs in a social context and therefore understanding the notions surrounding catalytic validity become important if one is to assess a particular study’s claims to knowledge. Catalytic validity in action

research can be determined by the degree of transformation the practitioner and participants experienced in their context as a result of the project (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010; Lather, 1986; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Newton & Burgess (2008) describe catalytic validity as the ability of the research process to transform the understanding of the participants and to motivate participants to undertake further social action. Moreover, catalytic validity is central to action research because its purpose is to document the emancipation and change to the status quo that has occurred in the research environment. In this way, action research can be seen as the methodology for change and catalytic validity measures, documents and demonstrates the amount of change that actually occurred during the research study. As a result, catalytic validity is critical for action researchers as it indicates that the processes of change have been initiated.

For over twenty years, Professor Patti Lather has argued in favour of the process of catalytic validity. Lather (1986: 67) describes catalytic validity as:

The degree to which the research process re-orientes, focuses, and energizes participants in what Freire (1973) terms "conscientization," knowing reality in order to better transform it. Of the guidelines proposed here, this is by far the most unorthodox as it flies directly in the face of the essential positivist tenet of researcher neutrality.

Lather argues that knowledge neutrality or objectivity in educational research is not possible and that the debate in social science between qualitative and quantitative "objectivity" is no longer valid in the post-positivist era (Alexander, 2006; Koro-Ljungberg, 2010; Lather, 1986, 2001, 2006; Silverman, 2011). Moreover, Fielding & Fielding (1986) argue that all methods of data collection are analysed qualitatively in so far as the act of analysis is interpretive on the part of the researcher and it requires purposeful selection of data for inclusion (or exclusion) in the study. This "selective rendering" of data is subject to a researcher's preference, individual bias and interpretation of the data in *both* qualitative and quantitative approaches to social science. As a result, qualitative researchers no longer have to justify claims to knowledge in relation to numbers, statistics or an abundance of psychometric methods in order to produce quality research.

### **Living theory and action research?**

For several years, McNiff & Whitehead (2010) have described action research as a type of transformative, generative process that facilitates the creation of "living theories" by practitioners. The authors assert that in action research "you are making your practice problematic by questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions (your own and that of others) and by questioning whether you are living your values in your practices (McNiff & Whitehead 2010: 47)." In other words, as the practitioner engages in action research he or she becomes directly transformed by the investigation. This transformation is consistent with the literature regarding high quality action research (Argyris *et al.*, 1990; Chapman *et al.*, 2011; Coghlan & Brannick, 2009; Koshy, 2010; Levin & Merrit, 2006; Somekh, 2006; Tomal, 2010).

With proper guidance it is possible for action researchers to experience the transformative process described by McNiff & Whitehead (2010). However, it is unreasonable to assume that every action research project generates living theory or to assume that every practitioner will be transformed by the action research experience. Several authors strongly criticise the quality of action research by teacher-practitioners as lacking in both *action* and *research* (Feldman, 2007; Perakyla, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2007). Action research has been criticised in the literature as a science of interpretation and not all interpretations are expert or equal (Alexander, 2006; Feldman, 2007; Hawkins, 2011). This lack of research expertise may lead to unreliable claims to knowledge which cannot claim the catalytic validity necessary to sustain “living theories” (Feldman, 2007; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Newton & Burgess, 2008).

### **Ethics**

Educational researchers have a duty to ensure that knowledge production is created in conjunction with a moral responsibility toward participants rights during the research study. These rights include the right to informed consent, trust, a right to withdraw and confidentiality (Ryen, 2010).

In this study, participants were provided with an informed consent mechanism that explained the nature of the research investigation (Appendix A). Participants were also informed verbally that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or notice to the research team (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Ryen, 2010). The informed consent mechanism explained that information gathered during data collection was to report on participants experience and trends in the TESL literature course at IPGKBL and did not contain any specific identifying features.

Furthermore, it was made clear that participation in the study posed no serious risks and appropriate precautions were undertaken to store and protect the data in a safe location. As a result, this action research was implemented with the informed consent, confidentiality, trust and voluntary participation of those involved and strictly adhered to the ethical recommendations highlighted by the educational literature (Elliot & Lukes, 2008; Lindorff, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Ryen, 2010).

### **Action research cycles**

The action research cycles have been designed to highlight the participants’ and researchers’ thoughts, feelings and perceptions of their experience during the action research study. In this section, the reader may notice a change in voice as I have requested that Madame Suez Pink generates, articulates and discusses the action research that occurred in her classroom during the study. These reflections serve a twofold purpose: first we can understand the participants’ points of view from the collected

data, and secondly, the data also shows Madame Suez Pink's views as well as her transformation into a researcher during the action research study.

### **Reconnaissance**

The reconnaissance survey was designed to collect background information about participants and to determine whether the research themes discussed prior to the investigation actually exist in classroom reality. The survey consisted of eight questions that were a mix of open and closed questions designed to establish participants' views of the PPG literature course.

### **Reflection by Madame Suez Pink**

A total of 52 questionnaires were distributed but only 26 of the June 2011 cohort course participants (CPs) responded. The CPs consisted of 19 female and seven males. Of these, the majority of had been teaching between six to twelve years in school, with only two participants having more than 21 years of experience. All the CPs, except for two, hold a diploma in education from Teacher Education Institute, while the remaining two hold teaching certificates. The majority of the CPs was of the opinion that they are moderately proficient in the language and all of them were satisfied being English teachers. Despite the satisfaction, additional responses revealed that these CPs believed they lack the skills and knowledge in the language. The main reason being they are teaching primary pupils and thus, are only exposed to "simple" English. All the CPs agreed that the TESL course is very useful to their teaching practice.

Suggestions about improving the course at IPGKBL range from course content to personal preferences. The majority of the negative comments were in regard the unavailability of the modules. Many stated that the modules ought to be given to CPs before the course commences. They also complained that they did not receive their modules in time; some even as late as into the third face-to-face interaction. There were also many suggestions that the course structure be revamped in accordance to a distance learning program structure rather than a "compressed" program of the PISMP TESL. The CPs also suggested that there should be more focus on the major subjects and a reduction in the minor. An analysis of question 12 showed that all CPs find the TESL course very challenging and demanding. They cited time constraints, lack of content knowledge, as well as the demands of studying and working, as their main grouses. In light of this, CPs asked for more face-to-face interactions and more opportunities for discussion with the lecturers concerned.

### **Cycle 1 plan**

After reflecting, the research team decided to use focus groups methods to uncover participant's views of the PPG TESL program at IPGKBL. The focus group method was a new approach for both Madame Suez Pink as well as for the PPG TESL participants, and this may account for some of the unwieldy data.

## **Reflection by Suez Pink**

The first set of focus group questionnaires was distributed to the 26 participants of the PPG TESL cohort 2 (February 2012 intake) who had responded to the first survey. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants during their second face-to-face interaction. Participants had already been introduced to the theories of literary criticism during class discussion. Guided questions on literary theories had already been posted onto the online portal and participants were expected to have participated in the forum online before the second face-to-face interaction. Upon enquiry, it was noted that only a few participants had participated in the forum online and many had not understood the information in their modules.

The participants divided themselves into groups of five and each group selected a moderator, a time keeper and a secretary. The moderator read the questions to the members and kept discussion on task. Each question was allocated five minutes for discussion. The discussion for each group was documented before the members proceeded to the next question.

## **Analysis of the discussion**

### ***Opening questions 1-2***

All the responses to this section used similar descriptions of the course – “challenging”, “difficult”, and “interesting”. One group also recorded the adjectives – “humorous” and “bravery”. In their responses to the second question, most of the groups cited the application of theory as the interesting aspect of the course.

### ***Transition questions 1 – 3***

In their responses to the module for the literature course, all members agreed that, “...it was difficult to understand the module, not friendly, not handy.” For question two, the majority cited time factors and understanding theories as their main cause for concern. One group cited “difficulty in understanding the modules” as the most challenging aspect of the course.

In their responses to question three, the researcher discovers that the main complaint is participants’ concern about completing their assignments. However, the participants were honest enough to admit that the other critical factor was their poor proficiency in the language. They all cited “poor writing skills” as their major difficulty in essay writing. One group mentioned that these poor writing skills were also a major concern for the other core subjects in the programme.

### ***Key questions 4-7***

Major problems cited for questions four to seven are summarised as follows:

- how to apply the theories,
- how to analyse the stories, and
- difficulty in understanding the modules.

Suggested steps for lecturers to help participants write critical essays:

- provide more examples of essays,
- provide samples of exam questions,
- teach “how to answer exam questions”, and
- give more time to complete assignments.

In their responses to question 6, all the groups recorded that:

- more face-to-face interactions be allocated in the program, and
- the lecturer prepare a lecture on “step by step on how to do assignment and exams”.

In their responses to question seven, many participants advised new participants to

- be physically, mentally and emotionally prepared for the degree course,
- be fully committed to work very hard, and
- get “tuition” in literature.

In summary, many participants found the TESL literature course extremely challenging and demanding. Many were already feeling stressed and worried that they were not sufficiently prepared for the demands of a degree course. Participants cited time constraints, lack of content knowledge, poor proficiency levels, as well as the demands of studying part-time and working full-time as their main challenges. There were numerous requests for more face-to-face interaction and more opportunities for discussion with appropriate tutors.

However, this researcher noted that all the groups specifically mentioned that the Literature course was “*very interesting, very informative, I never knew there are so many aspects of literature, I didn’t know there are theories in literature, quite difficult but quite interesting also*”.<sup>3</sup>

## **Cycle 2 plan**

After reflecting on cycle one, we revised our focus group method to generate better data with the study participants.

## **Reflection by Madame Suez Pink**

The second set of questionnaires was distributed to the 26 participants of PPG TESL cohort 2 (February 2012 intake) during the final face-to-face interaction. By then the participants should have completed eight topics of the syllabus in the module, “theories and application of theories on short

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<sup>3</sup> Direct quote (2012) from the focus group data.

stories”. They had been given the coursework which was to be handed in. In the course of the last four interactions, participants had already been exposed to all the different literary theories and class discussions as well as the online forum about analysing stories according to the relevant theories. Based on the previous experience, extra samples of analysis of stories together with guided questions for analysis, had been distributed through the PPG online learning portal. Hard copies were also made available for participants who had difficulty accessing the internet. In theory, participants should have become familiar with the various theories of literature and should have undertaken analyses of the stories using those theories.

The participants were divided into groups of five and each group selected a moderator, a time keeper and a secretary. The moderator read the questions to the members and kept discussion on task. Each question was allocated five minutes for discussion. The discussion for each group was documented before the members proceed to the next question.

### **Analysis of the discussion**

#### ***Opening questions 1-2***

All the responses to this section reveal some interesting choice of adjectives to describe the course – “extremely difficult”, “very challenging”, “very confusing”, and “very tough”. Although the question required the participants to use only one word to describe the course, participants felt the need to add adverbs to the selected adjectives. Despite the “negative” implication of the description of the course, all the groups’ responses highlight a positive aspect of the literature course:

- deepens/increases participants’ knowledge of literature in English,
- gives them new experiences in learning English,
- application of theories in their reading, and
- reveals the many aspects of literature which they were not aware of prior to the course.

#### ***Transition questions 1 – 3***

In their responses to the module for the literature course, all members agreed that the module was “overwhelming” in its learning objectives and the number of topics covered. The term used was “too ambitious” for a one-semester course. Many suggested that the course be divided into two modules instead; beginning with the four genres, followed by the literary theories. Participants argued that if the course was reshaped in this way, it would allow them to fully appreciate the literature itself as well as to comprehend the theories better. All the groups stressed that the course was relevant but that the two modules should be conducted over two semesters if it was to be effective.

The analysis also shows that participants are of the opinion that there are insufficient examples in the modules and no key answers were available. The explanations and notes given were limited. Also

mentioned was the lecture notes given by the tutor were more “informative” and relevant to their course.

In their responses to questions 2 and 3, the researcher discovered that the main complaint was the application of critical theories to the analysis of stories. All responses pointed to the fact that participants found this aspect the major cause of their inability to complete their assignment. However, the participants were honest enough to admit that the other cause is also their poor proficiency in the language. They all cited “poor writing skills” as their major obstacle in essay writing. One group mentioned that this difficulty is also of a major concern for the other core subject in the program.

### ***Key questions 4-7***

The following are the participants major problems based ordered on the level of severity

- low level of participants’ proficiency,
- time factor – too little time
- ‘over-simplified’ module, and
- no basics in literature at all; lack sufficient “exposure” to literature.

Despite the problems cited, additional responses revealed that participants believed that given sufficient time as well as interactions or tutorials, they would be able to complete the course successfully. An overall response reveals that despite the problems they encountered during the course, many participants appreciated the new knowledge they acquired and lamented the lack of time available to fully comprehend and appreciate the course content.

### **Suggested steps for lecturers to help participants to write critical essays:**

- provide a course on academic writing prior to the program,
- provide more samples of guided writing,
- provide past year exam papers, and
- allocate more time to complete assignments.

In their responses to question six, all the groups suggested that more face-to-face interactions be allocated in the program. One main reason (quoted from the focus group data):

The OLL (online learning) mode is completely useless for us teachers teaching in rural area with no access to the internet”, “even those who have limited access, we have to travel more than 40km just to assess the internet!”

All the groups requested an increase in face-to-face interactions for the major courses as they found these interactions effective. According to participants interactions enabled opportunities for discussion

and clarification with the tutors concerned. Many suggested a reduction in minor subjects and more papers in English during the TESL programme.

In their responses to question seven, many participants advised new participants:

- enrol for a non-TESL program instead,
- be mentally-prepared for the transition to “student-mode”,
- have excellent time management skills, and
- choose the ‘easiest’ IPG [participants implied that some of their friends studying in other IPGs pass the course because the tutors are not “strict” in their marking], where the failure rate is almost “zero”.

### ***Ending Questions 8 -9***

In brief, many participants found the TESL course extremely challenging and demanding. Many felt stressed and worried that they were not sufficiently prepared for the demands of a degree course. They cited time constraints, lack of content knowledge, poor proficiency level as well as the demands of studying part-time and working full-time, their main concerns.

From this perspective, participants requested more face-to-face interactions and more opportunities for discussion with the tutors concerned. There was also a call for a three-month preparatory course to prepare participants and also to ensure that only the “qualified” were selected for the degree program.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Emergent Themes**

Since action research relies heavily on demonstrations of catalytic validity the researchers in this study decided to highlight transformative intention(s), verbalisations and descriptive statements that were relevant to the participants and Suez Pink’s reflective account about the PPG literature course. In this way, emergent themes include both the positive and negative statements from participants and researchers in the collected data. Reason & Bradbury (2007) indicate that action research can resemble a documentary that raises issues, which become a powerful narrative to illuminate challenges stakeholders face. In fact, phenomena that were evident in one IPG course set a logical precedent, whereby the researcher began to extrapolate that the challenges these particular participants experience in the PPG literature course at IPGKBL exist elsewhere in Malaysia at other IPGs that offer the course (Stake, 1995).

In order to highlight the themes that emerged from the data we used a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory has a long tradition in qualitative research and several commentators propose this specific approach to make sense of data analysis (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011; Dey, 1999; Glaser &

Strauss, 1967; Larossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Moreover, grounded theory was found to be flexible enough to include notions of catalytic validity that could be incorporated into the emergent themes from the collected data.

Table two in the appendices illustrates the assembled data from the research cycles that contain emergent themes and catalytic statements. These catalytic statements were then organised into categories of emergent themes that will be discussed in turn.

In this study, three emergent themes were identified from the data with respect to the PPG literature course:

1. Course participants
2. Course delivery and design
3. Catalytic statements

### **Emergent theme one: course participants**

Participants in the PPG TESL degree program explained that the literature course was extremely useful, noting (quoted from focus group data): “the TESL course is very useful to teaching practice and increases my knowledge of literature in English.”

However, there were a number of problems implementing the PPG literature course at IPGKBL. For instance, the TESL degree program appeared to be pitched at too high a level when TESL participants’ actual academic ability was taken into account. The vast majority of the study participants had been out of school for over five years or more and had not used academic English or written academic essays since that time. Furthermore, participants explained that they were English teachers in rural Sarawak primary schools, which meant they did not have the opportunities to engage in high-level English or the standard of academic essay writing necessary to be successful in the literature course. Suez Pink (2012) writes: “participants’ worry in completing their (essay) assignment. The participants were honest enough to admit that the other cause is their ‘poor writing skills’ as their major difficulty in essay writing.”

Not surprisingly, participants argued that they felt unprepared to write critical essays or to deal with the complex content of the English literature course in an internet self-study mode of delivery. This theme runs throughout the data where participants acknowledge that they felt overwhelmed and unprepared to write postgraduate level essays in the PPG literature course at IPGKBL.

Participants’ statements cohere with the academic assessment by IPGKBL lecturers of the PPG literature course, and in fact this provided the impetus for this study in November 2011. In other

words, few participants had the postgraduate writing ability to complete the PPG literature course in its current online format. The vast majority of participants could not write the essays necessary to do well in the PPG literature course and were unable to gain this ability from the internet mode of delivery. In retrospect, it seems unrealistic to ask and expect these PPG literature participants at IPGKBL to perform well without first providing the essay writing and critical thinking skills required to enter into the PPG TESL degree program.

The researchers argue that entrance into the PPG TESL program should not have been automatic for every English teacher in Sarawak Malaysia. Rather, participants should have to pass basic entry requirements to demonstrate their ability to perform well (in terms of essay writing and critical thinking) in a postgraduate course. Several universities in Malaysia already have direct and bridged entry streams whereby applicants are directed according to their educational background, work experience and course entry requirements. This type of academic streaming offers several advantages to develop academic competency as potential students find themselves in the appropriate stream and academic level and are not overwhelmed by course content.

### **Emergent theme two: online delivery**

In our study, few participants were satisfied with the online self-study format of the literature course. One argued that (quoted from the data): “it was difficult to understand the online module, not friendly, not handy.” Both lecturers and participants of the PPG literature course strongly argued that the online self-study format was not conducive to learning in the course.

The online delivery required that participants engage in self-study and decode module lessons autonomously without teacher expertise to guide learning tasks. Without prior knowledge of literature, the technical content of the PPG literature course proved to be too difficult for the vast majority of our participants to master.

In reality, only a few participants regularly accessed the online format and when they did many did not comprehend the information in the module. Several participants also mentioned that internet access was a major obstacle in the rural areas of Sarawak:

The OLL (online learning) mode is completely useless for us teachers teaching in rural area with no access to the internet”, “even those who have limited access, we have to travel more than 40km just to access the internet!”

After teaching English full-time at their primary schools all day, it was unlikely that the rural participants would find an internet connection that would enable them to study the online module lessons. Moreover, participants noted that the online module was incomplete and they were not able to access (download) all the materials for the literature course.

## **Module Delivery**

Several participants noted that they did not receive their modules in time; some received theirs as late as the third face-to-face interaction. With a total of five face-to-face interactions of two hours in the entire course at IPGKBL campus, this was an important issue for participants. As a result of these challenges, participants agreed that the module was “overwhelming” in its learning objectives and the number of topics covered. The terminology used was “too ambitious” for a one-semester course. Moreover participants thought that the PPG literature modules provided insufficient examples, that explanations and notes provided were insufficient, and that there were no answer key provided to check and review self-study answers.

Participants suggested that the course should be divided into two modules instead; beginning with the four genres, followed by the literary theories. Participants argued that the course would then allow them to fully appreciate the content of literature and comprehend the theories better. All the groups were adamant that the course was relevant but that the ‘two’ module approach should be conducted over two semesters (one year instead of six months) in order to be effective.

## **Emergent theme three: statements of catalytic validity**

Catalytic validity in this action research study was achieved through participants’ honest realisations, acknowledgment and portrayals of their abilities; and an identification of what they needed in order to be more effective in the literature course. Secondly, the data shows a transformation of Madame Suez Pink into a researcher, as her analytical ability is evident in the research cycles and data analysis sections.

The itinerant evidence shows that the participants and lecturer (Suez) often reached agreement on the emergent themes in the PPG literature course that were then critically reviewed in conversation with the research team. These steps can be considered to be a form of data triangulation as Elliot & Adelman suggest (1976: 74) “triangulation involves gathering accounts of teaching situation from three quite different points of view; namely those of the teacher, his pupils and participant observers.”

## **Study Limitations**

Several limitations are involved in the promulgation of action research. These limitations impact the quality of data collected and also indicate that research involving human beings can never claim to be neutral, objective or impartial. In other words, social researchers are embedded with personal bias and viewpoints that deeply influence the decisions made during studies and ultimately affect the quality and presentation of the research findings. Action researchers, however, reject positivist notions of knowledge neutrality (Alexander, 2006; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Lather, 2001). Instead, the action

research practitioner immerses him or herself deeply in the subjective field of human experience in the classroom and attempts to make sense of what is going on in order to generate new knowledge through systematic reflection (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliot, 1991; Fals-Borda, 1991; Levin & Merrit, 2006).

Several commentators point out that the reflective power of action research builds up the normative foundation that gives a practitioner's statements qualitative value (what is going on?) and the self-confidence to engage in changing social reality (Argyris *et al.*, 1990; Fals-Borda, 1991). In action research, knowledge is not just randomly created, rather knowledge claims must be attained by means of analysis and systemisation in order to arrive at solutions that collate a logical, valid, and systematic chain of facts which emerge from the study (Fals-Borda, 1991; Feldman, 2007; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Perakyla, 2011).

### **Literature course design**

In 2011, the PPG literature course was designed at IPGM in Kuala Lumpur and then disseminated to the IPGs across Malaysia including our campus IPG in Sarawak. In the final analysis, the course content, structure, assessment, design, delivery mode and participants were already determined before participants arrived at IPG Batu Lintang in Sarawak. As a result, our study (2012) was limited in terms of being able to change the teaching format (course content) of the PPG literature class as participants were expected to engage in an online self-study mode followed up by intensive face to face interactions at IPGKBL. In other words, the course was problematic and challenging for the research team as they were unable to introduce ideas that may have improved the course.

### **The data speaks**

One of the first questions that educational researchers ask in data analysis is: "what is the data trying to say to me?" From reading and coding the research cycles, and in data analysis, the research team noticed that the data repeatedly reported the same thing; participants and lecturers acknowledge and identify the problem and challenges with the PPG literature course without evidence of significant improvement to participant's academic performance or critical thinking.

As a result, the data collected at three different moments in this action research study could perhaps be better seen as the first cycle (problem identification) of a three-year cycle of curriculum development investigation into the PPG literature course. In this way, the current study has identified the problem and during the next cycle of research (in 2013) the researchers would seek the autonomy to implement the suggestions for change in order to improve participant's academic performance.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst acknowledging the limitations of the present study, we recommend the following changes to improve the academic performance and critical thinking of participants in the PPG TESL degree program at IPGKBL Kuching, Sarawak Malaysia:

1. Academic streaming
2. Course delivery

As identified in the data analysis section there have been several problems with the course design and delivery of the PPG TESL degree program since it was introduced and offered at IPGKBL in September 2011. Instead of viewing these problems as insurmountable, this section discusses possible solutions for improvement to the curriculum design and course implementation of the PPG degree program at IPGKBL.

### **Academic streaming**

Several of the current problems with academic performance in the PPG TESL degree program could have been avoided by developing basic entry tests or exams that gauge whether the participants can write and perform at a post-secondary level before they are accepted into the PPG TESL program. In these researchers' view, entrance into the PPG TESL program should not be automatic for every English teacher in Sarawak Malaysia. Rather, participants should have to pass basic entry requirements, which demonstrate they are capable of performing well (in essay writing and critical thinking) in a postgraduate course. This type of academic streaming has several advantages in terms of developing academic competency, as potential students will be slotted into the appropriate stream and suitable academic level and will not be overwhelmed by course content.

Academic streaming in relation to the PPG literature program may include direct entry and abridged entry. In the direct entry stream participants pass the entry (test or exam) and in so doing demonstrate they are capable of performing well in a postgraduate course.

In the abridged form, or indirect entry, participants would be required to take one semester of a "preparatory writing course" to prepare them and also to ensure that only the 'qualified' are selected for the degree program. This abridged course would also provide the opportunity to further evaluate participants' academic ability and ensure that only those that are academically capable and committed gain entry into the direct entry stream of the PPG TESL degree program.

### **Course delivery**

Several participants in this study pointed out the PPG TESL degree program would benefit greatly from substantially increasing the number of contact hours (from ten hours to 40 hours a semester) so that participants have a real opportunity to experience face-to-face interaction with lecturers at

IPGKBL. In order to produce quality PPG TESL graduates, an increase of the face-to-face contact time is strongly recommended as one of the essential means to improving participants' academic performance.

We acknowledge that substantially increasing contact time is problematic as course participants also teach full time and have family responsibilities. However, once participants have been accepted into the TESL degree program, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has a duty to ensure necessary hours (workdays, weekday hours) are available for participants to successfully complete the course. In this way, the MoE is making an investment in participants' professional development that can substantially impact the learning and teaching of English that occurs at their school. As this study indicates, substantial change to the PPG TESL degree course is necessary before course graduates can become meaningful catalysts for change at their respective schools.

## **Summary**

This action research study into critical thinking and essay writing in the PPG literature course at IPGKBL finds that much more can be done to improve the curriculum and the quality of participants' experience throughout the course. These researchers hope that this action research study serves as a means to entering into frank discussion into the purpose of higher education courses at IPGs in Malaysia. For instance, is the purpose of courses like the PPG TESL literature course to produce a quantity of graduates that hold TESL qualifications but who have no true ability in essay writing or critical thinking? Or is the purpose of higher education in Malaysia to produce quality graduates who have tangible academic skills, who are capable of becoming a dynamic force for educational reform and who bring about change in their respective Malaysian schools?

This research is not a negative criticism of education in Malaysia, rather we believe it is only by identifying the problems through frank, honest and steadfast assessment of systemic problems that real change can occur in Malaysian higher education.

One of the positive aspects of centralised education system in Malaysia is that educational reforms and change can be implemented quickly once consensus about an efficacious direction has been reached. It is our hope that action research studies that document the reality of teaching practices on the ground will be used as a mechanism to empower stakeholders (students, lecturers, course designers and staff) to initiate curriculum reform and change in the IPGs. Action research for curriculum reform has been undertaken at the American Ivy League School, Cornell University on one of its core physics and science courses (Greenwood & Levin, 2005). Greenwood & Levin (2005: 60) explain:

Perhaps the reform of a single course (at Cornell University) does not seem like much of a social change, but we think it has powerful implications. This case demonstrates

the possibility of an action research based reform being initiated from a position of little power within a profoundly bureaucratic and hierarchical organization, the university.

The parallels between Cornell University and “a profoundly bureaucratic and hierarchical organization” and the centralised education system in Malaysia are numerous and beyond the scope of this research. But the significant implication is that by amending the PPG literature course at IPGKBL we could then extrapolate the lessons learned to influence curriculum design of other higher education courses in Malaysia.

This report argues that action research is designed to emancipate and empower stakeholders on the ground in order to make fundamental change to their social reality (Greenwood & Levin, 2005). By giving stakeholders a voice in curriculum reform, the Ministry of Education Malaysia acknowledges that its adult students, lecturers and in-service teachers are equal partners in the pursuit of educational excellence. Emancipatory action research is a powerful methodology for educational stakeholders to shift the status quo and bring about essential reforms to curriculum and andragogical teaching practise across Malaysia.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethics Statement

Dear Participant,

We are undertaking an action research project to study my own practice as a lecturer(s) in the TESL literature degree course at IPGKBL Kuching Sarawak Malaysia 2012. This ethics statement is to assure you that we will observe good ethical practice throughout the research.

This means that:

- Written ethical permission will be secured before the research commences;
- Confidentiality will be observed at all times, and no names or identifying personal features will be revealed during the study;
- Participants will be kept informed at all times and will have access to the research report before it is published;
- We will report only that which is in the public domain and in accord with Malaysian Law;
- All participants have the right to withdraw from the research at anytime and all data relating to them will be destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

Your signature\_\_\_\_\_

Contact information:

IPGKBL Campus Kuching  
English Department Jabatan Bahasa  
Madame So Suez Pink: [Suezso@yahoo.com](mailto:Suezso@yahoo.com)  
Dr. Hawkins: [Jeffhawk776@gmail.com](mailto:Jeffhawk776@gmail.com)

## Appendix B: Reconnaissance Survey

Total no of respondents: 29

No of female: 23

No of males: 6

Age group	No of participants
21 - 30	4
31 - 40	19
41 - 50	6

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<sup>4</sup> McNiff & Whitehead (2010: 81) You and Your Action Research project, SAGE.

Yrs of teaching	No of participants
1 – 5	2
6 – 12	18
13 – 21	7
Over 21 yrs	2

Level of proficiency	No of participants
Highly proficient	
Moderately proficient	19
Somewhat proficient	9
Not proficient	

Level of satisfaction in teaching	No of participants
Highly satisfied	15
Satisfied	14
Teach because school requires one	
Not satisfied	

No of years upon leaving college	No of participants
1 – 5 years ago	1
6 – 12 years ago	19
More than 12 years ago	9

Usefulness of TESL course	No of participants
Very useful	21
Useful	8
Not very useful	
Useless	

Ways of maintaining/develop	No of participants
English	
Travel abroad	1
Self-study	19

Taking courses	9
Others	

## Appendix C: Catalytic Validity

### Catalytic statements

#### Reconnaissance

- Many stated that the modules ought to be given to CPs before the course commence. They also complained that they did not receive their modules in time; even as late as into the third face-to-face interaction. There were also many suggestions that the course structure be revamped in accordance to a distance learning programme structure rather than a “compressed” programme of the PISMP TESL
- In lieu of that CPs asked for more face-to-face interactions and more opportunities for discussion with the lecturers concerned.

#### Cycle One

- Upon enquiry, it was noted that only a few participants participated in the forum on-line and many had not comprehended the information in their modules.
- “...it was difficult to understand the module, not friendly, not handy”
- In their responses to question three, the researcher discovers that the main complaint is participants’ worry about completing their assignment. However, the participants were honest enough to admit that the other cause was their poor proficiency in the language. They all cited ‘poor writing skills’ as their major difficulty in essay writing. One group mentioned that this difficulty is also of a major concern for the other core subjects in the programme. “difficulty in understanding the modules”
- Suggested steps for lecturers to help participants write critical essays
  - provide more examples of critical essays,
  - provide samples of exam questions,
  - teach “how to answer exam questions”,
  - give more time to complete assignment.
  - In their responses to question six, all the groups recorded that:
    - more face-to-face interactions be allocated in the programme.
    - the lecturer prepare a lecture on “step-by-step on how to do assignment and exams”.
- However, the researcher noted that all the groups specifically mentioned that the Literature course was, “...very interesting, very informative, I never knew there are so many aspects of

literature, I didn't know there are theories in literature, quite difficult but quite interesting also".

### Cycle Two

- deepens/increases participants' knowledge of literature in English,
  - gives them new experiences in learning English,
  - application of theories in their reading,
  - reveals the many aspects of literature which they were not aware of prior to the course.
- 
- "extremely difficult", "very challenging", "very confusing", "very tough"
  - In their responses to the module for the literature course, all members agreed that the module was "overwhelming" in its learning objectives and the number of topics covered. The term used was "too ambitious" for a one-semester course. Many suggested that the course be divided into two modules instead; beginning with the four genres, followed by the literary theory. Participants argued that in this way the course then would allow them to fully appreciate the contents of literature and comprehend the theories better. All the groups are adamant that the course is relevant but the 'two' modules should be conducted over two semesters in order for it to be effective.
  - The analysis also shows that participants were of the opinion that there were insufficient examples in the modules and no key answers were available. The explanations and notes given were too few. Also mentioned was the lecture notes given by the tutor were more "informative" and relevant to their course.
  - Major problems based on the level of severity:
    - low level of participants' proficiency,
    - time factor – too little time, too few face-to-face interactions,
    - 'over-simplified' module,
    - no basics in literature at all; lack sufficient 'exposure' to literature.
  - Suggested steps for lecturers to help them write critical essay
    - provide a course on academic writing prior to the program,
    - too few face-to-face interactions
    - provide more samples on guided writing,
    - provide past year exam papers,
    - provide more time to complete assignments.
  - In their responses to question 6, all the groups recorded that more face-to-face interactions be allocated in the program. One main reason cited was "The OLL (on-line learning) mode is completely useless for us teachers teaching in rural area with no access to the internet", "even those who have limited access, we have to travel more than 40km just to access the internet!"

- All the groups requested an increase in face-to-face interactions for the major courses as they find these interactions more effective; they allow for opportunities for discussion and clarification with the tutors concerned. Many suggested a reduction in minor subjects and more papers in English to be offered in the TESL program.

Sun. July 2012

# Brutal truths of education system

**T**HE fact that our education system needs immediate and drastic transformation is evident. In the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) around 20% of Malaysian students failed to meet minimum benchmarks for both Mathematics and Science, compared to only 5% in Science and 7% in Mathematics in 2003.

According to the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) 2009+ report, Malaysian students ranked 55th out of 74 countries in terms of reading literacy, 57th in Mathematics and "only marginally better" in 52nd position for Science literacy.

The number of unemployed graduates with either a diploma or degree from local institutions of higher education has risen since the 1980s to a record of 24.6% in 2010.

Our educational system generally promotes surface and passive learning instead of deep and active learning which is crucial for creating a quality learning environment.

The products of our school system are generally ill-prepared either for higher education, work or life in general.

Our students lack critical and creative thinking skills because our education system promotes conformity and uniformity.

Worse still, they have been "conditioned" to be spoon-fed.

Our graduates lack soft skills sought by employers, particularly communication skills, a strong work ethic, achievement-orientation, proactivity (initiative), planning and organising skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and human relations skills.

Mediocrity has also crept insidiously into our universities. A 2011 World Bank study has found that the academic standards of the Universiti Malaya have fallen due to race-based quotas and political interference in the university's management.

Based on my recent interactions with hundreds of university lecturers (including numerous professors) from four local public universities through my workshops on effective teaching and graduate employability, the vast

majority of them have a poor understanding of critical thinking and lack basic presentation skills.

What we need is to face the stark reality and brutal truths of our education system.

We have sacrificed meritocracy and quality teaching for mediocrity, politics and an overdose of social re-engineering.

We have sacrificed "quality" of graduates for "quantity" of graduates.

The first step in transforming our education system is to "begin with the end in mind".

The million-dollar question is to ask what should be the desired attributes of our students and graduates i.e. what kind of knowledge, skills and personal traits should they have to meet the challenges of the 21st century world.

Malaysian students and graduates should possess adequate disciplinary knowledge; self-confidence; be achievement-oriented; persuasive and effective communicators; demonstrate integrity and a strong work ethic; be self-directed, self-reflective and lifelong learners; be resilient; demonstrate good interpersonal and teamwork skills; be good problem solvers with analytical and creative minds; computer literate; and productive and responsible citizens with inter-cultural tolerance.

Towards this end, schools and universities should provide a high quality, broad-based and holistic education with emphasis on cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, moral intelligence, spiritual intelligence and physical well-being.

Various measures are needed to transform our education system.

First, the main driver of the variation in student learning at school is teacher quality.

Research shows that over 30% of the variance of school student achievement resulted from professional characteristics of teachers, teaching skills and the classroom climate.

Indeed, students placed with high-performing teachers are likely to progress three times faster as those placed with low-performing teachers.

In this regard, it is crucial to get people with the right competencies to become professional and highly motivated teachers who practise self-reflection, self-correction and continuous improvement.

Next, transformational leadership with a strong focus on instructional leadership (enhancing the quality of teaching and student learning) is the second most important determinant of student learning. Transformational leaders are visionary, inspirational and adept. More importantly, they nurture a high-performance school culture which brings out the best in others and transform them into peak performers.

Third, high-performing schools generally have high and realistic expectations of their students; a nurturing and motivating classroom climate; effective assessment (primarily formative) and feedback; a close community-home-school partnership; and adequate funding and resources.

Fourth, it is important to adopt an integrated and systemic approach (and not a piece-meal approach) towards transforming schools.

School transformation efforts must encompass clear educational outcomes, a broad-based and holistic curriculum, competent teacher recruitment and development, effective school governance, varied and student-centric instructional strategies, optimisation of e-learning, appropriate assessment and feedback, and a high-performance school culture committed to excellence and continuous improvement.

I sincerely hope that my letter will stir up a healthy and frank discussion among fellow Malaysians. The destiny of our country lies squarely in our hands.

Failure to transform our education system based upon systemic and brutal change will erode our nation's global competitiveness, organisational productivity and individual well-being.

**DR RANJIT SINGH MALHI**  
Kuala Lumpur

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