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Writing short messages in English: Out-of-school practices of Malaysian high school students

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Abstract

For Malaysian adolescents, writing in English covers various forms and serves a range of purposes. Outside the formal school context, students engage in more personalized forms of writing. This paper examines one such form, namely, the writing of short messages, using a sociocultural perspective of literacy as a social discursive practice that implicates identity construction. This paper draws on a larger qualitative study which looked at school and personal writing by a class of Form 4 (Year 10) students in an urban school in Malaysia. Data were taken mainly from student interviews and students' written products during six months of fieldwork. Findings from the study showed students' informal writing involved new hybrid forms of English and included the use of a mixture of short forms, "Penang English" and Net English. This study has implications for the English literacy education of Malaysian high school students learning ESL while immersed in a contemporary digital and Internet culture.

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1. Introduction

The focus of this article is on the language hybridity in Malaysian students' written communication, in the form of short messages, and how this relates to the multiple identifications they construct through their written exchanges. Theoretically the study is

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founded on an understanding of literacy as social discursive practice that involves identity work and representation. The implications of taking this perspective are canvassed in the first section of the paper together with a brief review of studies of adolescent out-of-school writing practices. The second section gives a description of the participants and the methodology used in the study. This is followed by the analysis of data on students' writing of short messages, which in this article include SMS phone texts, notes written in class, and online exchanges. These messages are unlike the sustained writing found in school essays. The final section discusses some implications arising from the findings.

2. Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical framework of this study draws on work that conceptualizes literacy as social discursive practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 1993) and identity as theorized within the critical poststructuralist approach (Gee, 2000/2001; Ivanic, 1998; Miller, 2003; Norton, 1997; Peirce, 1995; Weedon, 1987). Using a social discursive practice perspective, the study examines a group of Malaysian adolescent school students' engagement with writing as a literacy event (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and a specific instance of language use in relation to a wider sociocultural context (Lillis, 2001). The students' writing products are situated in a context of situation and a context of culture (Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Ivanic, 1998). As writers construct meaning in a particular context they are constituting and being constituted by a practice that has roots in history and culture. In different domains of social life there are different practices which are embedded within discourses.

Gee (1996) differentiates between two types of discourse, that is, discourse with a lowercase *d* and Discourse with an uppercase *D*. The word *d*iscourse refers to stretches of written or spoken language while *D*iscourse involves ways of being someone in a particular context, "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes" (p. 127). Although Gee (1996) makes a distinction between *d*/Discourse, some literature that uses the same concepts has not differentiated the two meanings of discourse (e.g., Hicks, 1995/1996; Ivanic, 1994; Lankshear, 1997). Texts, practices in which texts are embedded, as well as the thinking associated with these texts are all referred to as discourses. For example, students' written texts cannot be considered as only stretches of language (*d*iscourse) because they embody and emerge from the thinking associated with that kind of writing (*D*iscourse). The present study sees the two meanings as integrally related and employs the term discourse to refer to both meanings. Embedding practices in discourses enables us to see practices as normalized, regular and repeated ways of doing things, that are taken for granted by the insider of a group.

Writing as discursive practice is a social phenomenon and necessarily involves identity work, as identities are integrated with language and values in maintaining a particular practice. The language learner or user as a social being in a social world cannot be ignored and how the learner or user sees him/herself and how others view him/her are central issues (Gee, 1992; Miller, 2003). Students not only write from a particular stance, they also position their readers through the way they choose to communicate in various situations. These situations include both online and offline communication.

This is consistent with poststructuralist thinking on the socially constructed subject which views identity as an interpretation of one's self in relation to one's surroundings.

Identity is seen not as a unitary fixed construct but as multiple and subject to change. Identity is socially constructed and constrained, yet signals a process of negotiation and an exercise of choice or agency by the subject. Ivanic (1998) suggests a need to adopt a critical poststructuralist approach towards the concept of the socially constructed self, and she reminds us that identity is “socially *constructed*” but not “socially *determined*” (p. 12, emphasis in original). It is possible to challenge established dominant systems, which usually occurs when an individual acts in concert with other like-minded social members.

Similarly, Gee (2000/2001) sees identity as recognizability of a certain kind of person in a given context. The recognition of an identity trait is based on an interpretive system which may be “people’s historically and culturally different views of nature; it may be the norms, traditions, and rules of institutions; it may be the discourse and dialogue of others; or it may be the workings of affinity groups” (p. 108). Gee’s poststructuralist critical stance views identity work as active and dynamic as “people can accept, contest, and negotiate identities” (p. 109) depending on which perspective of identity is foregrounded. Identities are linked to Discourses in that they “are ultimately rooted in recognition processes tied to specific Discourses” (p. 111). Thus the construction of self is constrained both by Discourses as well as the interpretation shaped by Discourses. In this sense identity is “doubly socially constructed” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 6).

In the different domains of social life where identity construction is actively at work, literacies are communicative resources that form part of our daily social practices; they are plural and vary in form and meaning according to social contexts. Literacies are “both a product of, and a cultural tool for, members of a social group, and are constituted in and through their literate practices” (Crawford, Castanheira, Dixon, & Green, 2001, p. 32). Different literacies are employed depending on a number of related factors. In the area of writing these factors could be who the writer is communicating with, the identity of the writer, the purpose of communication and resources available.

The social situatedness and plurality of literacies are seen in the multilingual literacies of Malaysians that show a combination of vernacular and dominant hegemonic literacies (e.g. Gaudart, 1987; Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2004) and language hybrids. The informal written communication of the participants in the study exemplified as language hybridity in literacy practices involving identification, creativity and meaningful communication. As we demonstrate, this example of hybridization has some of the features outlined in Lee’s (1998) description of Manglish as well as Melchers and Shaw’s (2003) account of basilectal/mesolectal Malaysian English.

2.1. *Out-of-school literacy*

In a comprehensive review of the research on out-of-school literacy Hull and Schultz (2001) argue that “the distinction between in-school and out-of-school sets up a false dichotomy” (p. 577) by giving the impression that contexts are bounded by time and location. For this study, out-of-school writing refers to writing that is voluntary, informal and serves very different purposes to assigned school writing. It can also be done in school as in the case of the handwritten notes passed around during lessons. Its form is contrasted with the formal school essay, an artifact belonging to the English curriculum within the institution of school. In what follows, we examine a group of studies on the voluntary writing practices in English of adolescents from various settings in the USA. Table 1 gives

Table 1
Description of participants

Study	Participants
Camitta (1993)	Black, white, Hispanic teenagers in an urban school in Philadelphia
Shuman (1993)	Black, white, Puerto Rican adolescents in a junior high school in Philadelphia
Finders (1996)	4 early adolescent Euro-American girls in a school typical of midwestern suburban and rural schools in the USA
Moje (2000)	5 gang-connected adolescents (Vietnamese, Latina, Latino, Laotian and Samoan) in an urban school in Salt Lake City, Utah
Schultz (2002)	Urban adolescents in a school made up of African Americans, Mexican Americans and Asian Americans, 75% from low income families
The present study	Urban Malaysian adolescents in a multiracial public secondary school in Penang

a description of the different groups of adolescents in the school context who participated in the studies reviewed.

Camitta (1993) found her adolescent students engaged in “vernacular writing” which included the writing of poems, letters, notes, diary entries and others. Although these activities sometimes occurred in school, the writing was associated with cultural practices that were “neither elite nor institutional” (p. 228). Shuman (1993) documented adolescents’ “collaborative playful writing” (p. 250) in school that produced forged notes of excuse, forms, letters and other texts. Some of these involved a series of exchanges carrying questions and replies among a network of students. In Moje’s (2000) study, her students identified themselves as “gangstas” or as affiliated with local gangs, and produced poetry, parody, graffiti, tags, letters and notes. All these were categorized by Moje as written discourses which she argued were better understood together with the “body discourses” and “oral language discourses” of the gang members. In the literate “underlife” of the Euro-American adolescent schoolgirls in Finders’ (1996) study, notes which contained highly coded messages were used to exclude outsiders from tight friendship circles. These girls used literate practices to represent self, consolidate their sense of identity, strengthen friendship bonds or show social allegiances and to exclude outsiders. Such alternative and sometimes subversive writing was however not found in Schultz’s (2002) study. Her participants instead wrote poems, letters, journals, plays, fiction and nonfiction prose, all of which were closer to assigned school writing.

On the Internet, Knobel and Lankshear (2002) found some adolescent writers claim space through the publication of zines (from “magazines”), “a do-it-yourself (DIY) countercultural form systematically opposed to conventional norms and values associated with publishing views of the “establishment” and “schooled” reading and writing” (p. 165). Zines have various textual forms and typically have telling, yet quirky titles like *Bombs for Breakfast*, *ROCKRGRL*, *Deeply Shallow* and *I’m Over Being Dead*. The inclination towards non-mainstream perspectives and an openness in sharing personal experiences attract a wide readership, solidarity and responses from others.

Another literacy practice that is attracting the attention of researchers is fanfiction writing online. Fanfiction writing is an activity shared by members of a fandom interacting in a virtual environment to write about and extend popular works of fiction. Thomas

(2005) showed how a group of children maintained a virtual community by “adopting identities mediated through text, image, sound, and both within and out of their fantasy storylines” (p. 28). In another study, Black (2005) discussed the affiliation of her writers with a fan community. Their co-constructed texts which contained Japanese and Chinese vocabulary and culture were discussed in terms of linguistic and cultural hybridity, intertextuality and hybrid identities enacted by the authors. Similarly, examining the anime-inspired fanfics written by two adolescent school girls, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) found elements of multimodality, intertextuality and hybridity. These studies on fanfiction are of interest to ESL teachers and researchers in that they showed autonomous learning, as well as engagement and motivation in writing, a case not often found in the ESL classroom.

The studies reviewed in this section are some in the field that show how adolescents use writing to maintain social links, indicate affiliations and identification, as well as make sense of their lives. This article focuses on the phenomenon of language hybridity among adolescent Malaysian users of English in order to highlight out-of-school writing practices within a specific sociocultural context.

3. Methodology, data sources and analysis

The present study is part of a larger qualitative study which began with a focus on formal writing and later developed to include informal writing in English by a class of Form 4 (Year 10) secondary school students in an urban school in Penang, Malaysia.

3.1. *The participants*

The school was a public, co-educational secondary school located in a middle-class residential area in an urban part of Penang. With an enrolment of about 700 students, the school was a relatively small relaxed community without the pressure felt in many big prestigious secondary schools in Penang. The teaching staff comprised 44 teachers, of whom 41 were graduate teachers. Most classes consisted of 30–40 students and in terms of academic achievement, the school was neither elite nor backward.

The participants were 31 students from a Form 4 (Year 10) class, collectively known as *4 Science 1*. All of them have been given pseudonyms. At the time of this research the students, on average, had about nine years of formal education in ESL. In terms of formal schooling they were quite homogeneous. Only one female student came from a National Type primary school which used the Chinese language as the medium of instruction. All the other students were from National primary schools where Bahasa Melayu (the national language) was the medium of instruction. The students had been streamed into this class based on their results in the previous year's *PMR* (Lower Secondary Examination) standardized public examination. Eight of the students in this class obtained 7As (straight As) in this examination. With the exception of one student, all obtained an A for English language, and they formed the strongest academic class in Form 4.

All of the students in the interviews said they were happy to be part of *4 Science 1*. As the best Form 4 class in the school the class had the reputation of being smart but playful and noisy. In KE's (one of the authors) first few days in the school, while explaining the location of their classroom to her, their English teacher said, “You can find them very easily. They are the noisiest class in the whole school.” Nevertheless, they were the hope of

the school in the Form 5 *SPM* examination (Year 11 standardized public examination). In addition, nearly half the class held various positions of responsibilities on the Prefects' Board and in the clubs and societies in the school. Thus *4 Science 1* had an image with two facets: the playful and the academic.

The students came from a variety of family backgrounds ranging from the lower to the middle income group. A few parents held top management positions. In 14 families both parents were working while in the other 17 families the mother was housewife. The majority of the students themselves aspired to develop a career in the medical, engineering, biotechnology or computer science field. Nearly all their ambitions entailed professional jobs that require a university degree.

The students possessed complex linguistic repertoires which could include a few dialects and languages. Most of the time, English and Bahasa Melayu were used in daily communication. However, Hokkien, Cantonese and Tamil could also be heard coming from the Chinese and Indian students. Each user showed different levels of proficiency, in the four modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing for the languages and dialects spoken. Many students often were not sure what their mother tongue was. They were happy to name English as their first language because that was the language they could best express themselves in. However, their proficiency in English was not always that high. Many Chinese students used Hokkien fluently, but these same students could not recognize any Chinese characters. This is the multilingual complexity that Malaysians live in every day.

3.2. *Fieldwork*

KE conducted the fieldwork in the school over a period of six months. Data sources included formal and informal observations of the students in the school context and interviews. Formal observations were carried out in 11 writing lessons (each of 70 min duration) scheduled by the class English teacher. These lessons were consistently conducted in a double period on Friday according to the students' timetable. Outside the scheduled period, on at least three school days each week, informal observations were conducted. These took place during free periods, recess time, school assemblies and extracurricular activities such as games sessions and prefects' functions. KE's role as the researcher was that of a participant observer (Spradley, 1980).

During the writing classes, KE sat at a makeshift corner of the classroom from where she wrote her field notes and tape recorded the lessons. Sometimes she moved around the classroom to observe more closely what the students were doing. She avoided the role of authority and remained friendly and approachable. She made it known that she was not there to judge the teacher's effectiveness in instruction or the students' performance. Outside the classroom, she moved around with the students, for example, she sat at their table in the canteen and stood in line with them during school assemblies.

There were three interviews; the first two interviews involved all 31 students while the third interview involved 11 students. This last interview was conducted at the end of the school term and did not involve every student for a number of reasons. Many students in this school regarded the school year to be over once they had taken their final examinations. In *4 Science 1* attendance at this time of the year was somewhat haphazard. In addition, those who were present were busy attending to extra-curricular matters such as planning for training camps during the holidays. The prefects in this class were also

occupied with their interview sessions designed to recruit new leaders from the lower forms to join the board.

Almost all the interviews were conducted in the school guest waiting-room located in the administrative block. The protocol for the first student interview was based on the constructs of self-representation, family, orientation towards writing, orientation towards English, English learning experience and perceptions of schooling. This semi-structured individual interview lasted approximately 45 min and was audiotaped. The second and third interviews lasted about 30 min each. The protocol for the second interview was formulated after a preliminary analysis of three essays written by the students, the responses in the first interview and classroom observational data recorded up to that point of the fieldwork. The third interview was mainly to clarify the underlying discourses related to achievement, expectations and perceptions of self observed in the students' behaviours and classroom events and from their responses during prior interviews.

Apart from these three interviews there were also numerous short informal discussions and interactions with students in the different settings mentioned earlier. These opportunities, recorded as field notes, were used to explore or clarify certain issues. For example, the students were observed to behave differently in front of different subject teachers. The biology teacher found them mischievous and not serious in their studies. When Aaron, one of the participants, was asked about their boisterous behaviour in their biology class, he said, "At our age, we are like that." He felt that they were positioned by the biology teacher as docile learners and recipients of knowledge. However, Aaron felt that it was natural for adolescents to be inquisitive and sometimes annoying in the eyes of the adults. Following this up with them enabled us to explore further the idea that the classroom was the intersection of a number of contradictory discourses.

3.3. Short messages

From the first interview we learned that many students were actively engaged in writing short messages in the form of SMS phone messages and online communication outside school and handwritten notes in class. This prompted us to review our research focus to include out-of-school writing practices. Students were invited to recall from memory the messages they had sent and write them in a questionnaire (see Appendix A), administered during a free period. A total of 310 messages were collected with each student submitting an average of 10 messages. A breakdown of the categories is given below (Table 2).

These data triangulated with and were analysed in relation to other data from the fieldwork. The language and content found in the students' real time online discussion and described by them in their interviews as well as the recalled messages they produced were consistent in form and content. Questions regarding English language use in the interviews yielded information on Internet postings and SMS phone texting together with the language and content in these interactions. Some of the interview excerpts are given in later

Table 2
Categories and number of short messages collected

SMS messages	Messages in class	Online messages	Total
105	83	122	310

sections. We also include a part of an authentic online forum discussion by a group of boys (see Appendix B) to compare with the short messages recalled by the students. Such cross-checking of data from various settings helped to show that the short messages collected for this study were genuine and plausible. However, a better way of soliciting authentic data of this nature would be to ask the participants to copy out from their cell phone's memory messages sent and received within a time frame of, for example, one week.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was two-tiered. The first level of analysis was guided by the principles of grounded theory as well as the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The second level of analysis involved using the principles and tools of discourse analysis (Gee, 1996; Gee & Green, 1998).

To facilitate analysis, notes from the first interview data were organized into an Excel chart. Questions from the interview were placed horizontally along the chart while students' names were put into the vertical grids. From multiple readings of this sheet which displayed a detailed summary of all the students' responses in the first interview, one of the themes we identified was hybrid language use in out-of-school writing practices. As explained earlier in Section 3.3, we then went on to devise a questionnaire (Appendix A) to collect a range of short messages from the participants. This input was analysed in relation to other data sources in the study.

4. Out-of-school writing: short messages

In the first part of this section we present a range of short messages in Table 3 below, as recalled by the participants. Of the class of 31, 9 were female. The messages written by the

Table 3
Examples of short messages

SMS messages	Messages in class	Netchat messages
New game comin out 2morow wanna folow to BJ?	No guts to talk lar!	Becarefull who you are messing with, 'Old Man'.
Fishing tomolo?	Sunny arr dun play lar.	Got wat homework today?
What'ca gonna do, when Hulkamania runs wild on you, Brother?!! ♀	Hey manhunt said he wanna go fishing on monday? So we r not going 2 skool on mon.	gota go bye :)
Asshole y don't wan go add maths go lar ... idiot	Wei, boring lo, want to go out.	Hie...how r u? So sien tonite. ♀
Hei, loser! F U.	My god! Look at that 'sui' girl... Isn't she gorgeous....He!He!	Dont be rude, nanti kena banned.
Hey after add. maths wanna go prangin ar?	R U coming 2 tuition 2day?	

Translations and explanatory notes: BJ, name of a shopping mall; prangin, name of a shopping mall; tomolo, tomorrow; *lo*, *lar*, *ar*, *arr*, tail ender expressions; *dun*, don't; *sui*, Hokkien word for "pretty"; *sien*, Hokkien word for "bored"; *nanti kena*, Malay for "might get".

girls are marked with the symbol ♀. There are more messages from the boys, given the class composition of 22 boys out of 31 students. In form and content most of the messages are not related to school writing and appear to represent an alternative way of “doing” adolescent identity.

These informal messages written for the main purpose of communication among members show them sharing a set of conventions to produce, distribute and consume (Fairclough, 1992). In the following sections we use specific examples to discuss the nature of the exchanges and the construction of identities within these interactions. We do not differentiate between the three types of messages but focus on the language hybridity across all of the messages. As a result, we examine Penang English and short forms or ICQ language—in terms that the participants themselves used to describe their medium of communication.

4.1. Penang English

When Yun Tong explained to KE (addressed as ‘teacher’) that, “Usually we use Penang English, teacher, which we mix *lah*” (Interview 1, 30-7-03), he was describing the language he used in his online chat. We felt he was explaining his ownership of the language. This phenomenon is a register known by users as “Penang English” and owned by Malaysian adolescents, more specifically, Penang secondary schoolers. Each time they used it they validated their identification among themselves and signalled to outsiders their affiliation.

In her research on spoken English, Nair-Venugopal (2000, 2004), points out that Malaysian English is geographically distributed and socially defined within Malaysia. The workplace is one social domain where the practices show an idiosyncratic use of spoken English. We would argue that the Malaysian secondary school is another such domain. The students’ written interactions show the creative and innovative hybridization of ICQ language and Penang English.

According to one of our interviewees, Edward, these adolescents were not using English, only “half” English. In the excerpt below he differentiated the language used by local people and foreigners in his online communication.

- Interviewer: Do you think that that is also English?
 Edward: That is half of it *lah*.
 Interviewer: And those people, are they international people or are they local people?
 Edward: Local and international.
 Interviewer: Can you tell the difference?
 Edward: Local members use like () and Hokkien sometimes and BM (Bahasa Melayu) as well. Then whereas the international will use the full language, like the full usage of the language.
 Interviewer: With grammar and everything else?
 Edward: Ya.
 Interviewer: So they write full sentences you mean?
 Edward: Ya.
 Interviewer: Do they still use the “u”?
 Edward: Some use it, some don’t.

- Interviewer: So what you mean is, although they use the “u” and “b4” but you can tell that it’s a full sentence?
- Edward: Yes I can tell.
- Interviewer: Whereas the local people you can tell (1.0)?
- Edward: Like half, half sentence, continue another one.
- (Edward, Interview 1, 14-7-03)

Edward could easily distinguish their own language from “the full language” of international users. Local constructions contained code-switching as Edward said, “Like half, half sentence, continue another one.” For example, “Hie...how r u? So sien tonite” has the word “sien,” Hokkien for “bored.” “Dont be rude, nanti kena banned” is another example with a Malay phrase which carries the meaning of “might get.” It is one student’s note of caution to another. In the context of criticizing the administration of a website, one student cautioned another not to post rude messages to the administrators. Even single words might not be “full” but subject to the fancy of the user. For example, we can find in Table 3, “tomorrow” is also written as “tomolo”. There are always rules but this form allows individuality and creativity.

This language was not only made up of short forms but also elements from Hokkien (a Chinese dialect) and Bahasa Melayu (commonly referred to as BM), matching Yun Tong’s description of the “mix” which has a geographic significance. Among the northern residents of Peninsular Malaysia, the Hokkien dialect is more popular. In the south Cantonese is spoken widely while over in East Malaysia, Hakka and Hock Chew are popular. These trends mark out the migratory patterns of the early Chinese settlers originating from the various clans in China. The participants in this study observed that their utterances are punctuated with Hokkien words, probably due to the prevalence of this dialect in the society.

Like Yun Tong, Wen Kin in the interview excerpt below categorized this mix as Penang English, a further division of Malaysian English.

- Wen Kin: It’s like, Penang English not Malaysian English.
- Interviewer: Penang English?
- Wen Kin: Penang English, *rojak*.
- Interviewer: Can you give an example? This is the first time I hear “Penang English.” I always think that there’s “Malaysian English.”
- Wen Kin: Like we combine Hokkien with English words.
- Interviewer: OK give me a word or give me an example.
- Wen Kin: It’s like every sentence behind we end up with an “la.” It’s like Hokkien like that.
- Interviewer: Or “meh”?
- Wen Kin: Ya something like that.
- Interviewer: So it’s very natural?
- Wen Kin: Very natural.
- Interviewer: Very natural. That’s very interesting. So you enjoy that?
- Wen Kin: Ya. Very common already.
- (Wen Kin, Interview 1, 7-7-03)

Wen Kin has aptly used the metaphor “*rojak*” to describe Penang English. *Rojak* is a Malay word for a local mixed vegetable and fruit salad. This local dish is prepared with a variety of fresh vegetables and fruits, the combination of which is entirely up to the preference of the person serving it. These ingredients are cut up and mixed together in a sometimes spicy sauce, and is popular among the locals. Foreign tourists may find the taste less agreeable. And like the *rojak* dish, Penang English is “nice,” “very natural” and “very common already” among local users such as Wen Kin and his peers.

Malaysians are aware that they do not speak the “Queen’s English.” Malaysian English or Manglish as some call it, is laughingly accepted as the norm. Manglish terms have been compiled by Lee (1998) to show the influence of vernacular languages on English. The expression *lah* which typically appears at the end of a word, phrase or sentence is but one of the many colourful expressions used and enjoyed by Malaysians. Other similar expressions in Table 1 include *lar*, *ar*, *arr*, *wei* and *lo*. Lee feels that Malaysians who have a command of English often know how to speak “proper English” but use Manglish to connect with fellow Malaysians. To speak Manglish is to be uniquely Malaysian. In everyday communication, Malaysians are “shameless owners” of English (Sifakis & Sougari, 2003) and differentiated from native speaker groups.

4.2. Short forms or ICQ language

Another feature of the short messages is the presence of ICQ language. ICQ is a popular Internet service and software that hosts the participants’ online chat. Evelyn described ICQ language as “short forms.”

We call it the ICQ language. Like umm, “How are you,” we put all the short forms like r and u... It’s, I think it’s like normal when you online. And then you talk to that person very long. Then you tend to use that word also right. It’s normal *lah*.
(Evelyn, Interview 1, 2-7-03)

For Evelyn it was easily and naturally acquired through a process of socialization and online literacy learning. Constant exposure to this form logically made the practice “normal.” Syaza also agreed that the ICQ language was indirectly learned through apprenticeship. She said, “You see when people talk to you, you tend to learn” (Syaza, Interview 1, 18-6-03). Here we see both of them foregrounding spoken communication. Their use of “talk” and not “write” signals a view that their short messages were more a written form of their spoken language. Although they were written, the messages were informal and used in meaningful everyday communication as in speaking. In the absence of paralinguistic support such as body language, intonation and stress, found in face-to-face interactions, the students sometimes employed emoticons, as pointed out by Syaza, “Ah, there’s this smiley thing that you can put” (Syaza, Interview 1, 18-6-03). Syaza’s reference to the “smiley” indicates that their identity construction is not only mediated by the use of a particular language hybrid, but also by the widespread use and application of technology in their lives.

“got a go bye :)” has a global quality in that any urban kid exposed to similar media influences and social environment in any part of the world could have written it. In Table 3 we can see that while some constructions clearly point to a Malaysian local origin, some do not have origin specific identities, for example, “2morow”, “loser! F U”, “how r u?”, “2day” and “wanna”.

4.3. Insider status

Through their exchanges we get glimpses of interpersonal relationships. Friendship, an important aspect of any adolescent culture, was cemented through spending much time together in activities like fishing, private tuition classes outside of school, going to the mall and online chat.

The students' use of specific terms such as "Old Man," "Hulkamania," "Brother" and "manhunt" cast them as insiders, and place others outside their circle of friendship. Their identity/identification was inscribed in the content as well as in the lexical choices and phrases used in their messages. However, unlike the participants in Finders (1996) and Moje's (2000) studies who used literacy practices purposefully to represent self and to claim social space in the context of gangs and rival groups, the students in this study did not share the same intentions. They were not observed to be divided into opposing groups where there was a constant need to mark themselves as different or to make known their membership or affiliation. Although their seating arrangements in class revealed their choice of companions, they were found to mix freely with one another. Usually the same groups of people would be involved in an animated discussion on a topic of shared interest but there was no indication of intentional isolation of anyone or group. These friendship patterns were also reflected in interview data on out-of-school activities.

Within the class the students communicated with peers in an exchange of ideas, commentary or information. For example, "New game comin out 2morow wanna folow to BJ?" (BJ is a popular shopping mall where many participants, especially the boys, in this study liked to hang out) is an invitation to members who were into computer games and hanging out at the mall. "Hey after add. maths wanna go prangin ar?" reveals a plan to head straight for their favourite Prangin Shopping Mall after Additional Mathematics tuition class, again an invitation for like-minded people. On a more serious note, "Got wat homework today?" requests for information about homework which individual subject teachers assigned regularly to the class.

The students also communicated feelings such as empathy, affection, amusement, disgust and exasperation to each other. The messages "Wei, boring lo, want to go out" and "So sien tonite" were likely aimed at friends who would recognize what boredom means to teenagers. "No guts to talk lar" is a confession of a lack, something that an adolescent probably only admits to someone he/she is close to. In the message "Asshole y don't wan go add maths go lar ... idiot," the student was probably upset that his tuition mate had decided to skip the Additional Mathematics tuition class that day. In this exasperated message, he took the opportunity to curse and at the same time poke fun at his friend. The use of curse words and coarse language in their messages seems acceptable and bears no risk of censure. Messaging was also used to control the behaviour of others. For example, Sunny was often observed to disturb his classmates in class by kicking their chairs, talking to them or shouting out a smart remark now and again. This note, "Sunny arr dun play lar," (Sunny, don't play the fool) was probably written to implore him to stop his antics. The students' choice of words for each other is a sign of familiarity. Only those within the circle can have such liberty.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the writing of short messages, one form of the out-of-school writing of a group of Malaysian adolescents living in an urban environment. In assigned school

writing, the activity was one of language study and practice entailing the maintenance of school values and academic and examination discourse. School writing, done within the examination-oriented and often teacher-centred class, consisted of set text types that fit examination genres. Part of the school discourse was self-censorship (Tan & Miller, *in press*). In their informal interactions, however, students wrote freely to maintain friendships, to overcome boredom, and basically to fulfil their need for meaningful communication. Content in students' messages was unguarded and uncensored, revolving mainly around relationships, school and social life. They were unhampered by poor grammar or lack of vocabulary, and their messages were usually fully understood and responded to, most of the time, instantaneously.

Such engagement in out-of-school writing in English and the language hybrid employed to connect with one another point to the need to research on literacy practices outside of school. As adolescent students continue to use ICQ language, Penang English or Net English to interact through online communication or instant phone-messaging, teachers need to acknowledge this practice and examine how these varieties of English differ from Standard English and to use the analysis to help the students acquire the "standard" variety necessary for school. This is also suggested by Lam (2000) who studied the electronic communication of her case-study, Almon, with the members of a multicultural group drawn together by their interest in Japanese pop culture. Research also should focus on whether computer mediated communications technologies such as email, Netchat and online postings contribute to second language acquisition. Furthermore, the linguistic repertoires of the participants and the construction of multiple identities in their literate lives support the need to "heteroglossize" English (Lin & Luk, 2005) in the classroom to enable the students to be competent in school English as well as be owners of the different social languages within their command. Let us illustrate using a recent episode in a microteaching session for trainee teachers at KE's institution (25-01-06). The teachers in this lesson were given the following group activity.

Act out in groups or in pairs the short text given. You are allowed to change the situation if you like. Be creative.

"Just because you're a little older than I am, why should you be chief? I am taller than you are and braver."

While other groups chose to perform choral speaking using the short dialogue, one particular group decided to send one male teacher forward to perform a colloquial version of the dialogue. He must have had his students in mind when he expressed the following register.

I'm taller and braver than you. What! You don't believe ah!

What! You thought you big, bigger than me, then you can be chief ah!

This informal form is similar to the short messages collected in this study. If Malaysian teachers can encourage the reverse exercise, that is, show how the utterances can be converted to school English, they are doing what Lam (2000), Lin and Luk (2005) and we are advocating.

In addition, students' extracurricular competences may enhance their acquisition of school writing. There is a tendency to label what is outside of school as not only less important but also illegitimate. For example, students' short messages, online discussions, diary writing, poems and blogs (short for "web logs") do not count as writing in school. In

bridging the discourses we can blur the distinction between writing in-school for examinations and writing out-of-school for self. This dichotomy implies that what is done in school requires discipline and is subject to objective judgment whereas what is done outside is just fun, although meaningful. In the larger qualitative study (Tan, 2005), some of the participants were engaged in writing diary entries, poems and blogs as well. Therefore, instead of focusing on the contrast between school writing and out-of-school writing in content and form, attention should be on how to tap into students' expressive skills and engagement in informal writing to support school writing. At the very least, recognition of these literacy practices may influence student motivation and engagement in school-related tasks.

Given that the students' informal writing in English is wide-ranging, to ignore these out-of-school practices would be to ignore a large part of their daily experiences and their many representations to function as effective members of diverse social groups. Writing in school should be informed by outside practices so that students are equipped with appropriate literacy skills in a contemporary, fast-paced and digital society.

Appendix A. Questionnaire on informal writing

Student's name: _____ Date: _____

Dear 4 *Science 1* students,

The interview responses show that you do a bit of informal writing (SMS messages, notes or jokes passed around in class while the lesson is going on, email, netchat or ICQ, ...). These may be in proper sentences, 'broken English,' short forms, 'ICQ language,' 'English mixed with BM or Hokkien' and other forms.

Please recall for me as many examples as possible.

With thanks,

Ms Tan

SMS messages	
Messages in class	
Messages via email, ICQ	

Appendix B

The following is a part of a set of asynchronous exchanges which took place between 15 and 29 April 2004. Screen names are in Arial font.

D@rk

ban ken's IP address...

he spam too much ☺

o10+01o

i agree with you ADMIN

and 1more requet

warn those ppl that post any of our class's member's picture

D@rk got bug at hardware forum...
when i click on my topic "GE FORCE 6800 HIT 14k"
it automatically close my window..!

monaymonay no mentioning of names please.
baby way n king of hacker will b ban

B@byw@y admin ar...me want 2 become mod...open a new
forum which is about music....guitar tabs 1...can
bo...? n wat have i done...? y kena warning so much
1...?

o10 + 01o you ask yourself
the answer is in your head

Hilluk o10 + 01o answer ppl politely lar
KinG OF HackeR look thru all ur post
most of them r spam post dat is y u always
kena lar

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

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