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## Fostering Critical Literacy in English Language Teaching Through Democratic Participation

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### Abstract

Malaysia's Education System aims to supply the country with marketable and productive human capitals for the purpose of flourishing the economy. However, the production of human capitals is often faced with setbacks especially with regards to inculcating critical thinking skills or high order thinking skills in lessons in individual classrooms. This could be due to the lack of ability in creating suitable lessons or materials and the race to score well in examinations. Hence, an intervention program was created with the aims to foster critical literacy through democratic citizenship activities while practising using language in a second language classrooms. With critical literacy integrated into the intervention, the cognitive skills of the learners are enhanced, critical literacy and critical pedagogy are very suitable with the requirement of the Malaysian Education Visions as it complements the six student's aspiration outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint. The program requires students to role play as parliamentary candidates, conduct research and hold a debate in a mock-up parliamentary sessions. Data was collected through students' reflections and researchers' field notes. Findings suggest that learners are able to move beyond the passive learning styles and are able to accept, manage and understand more complex information and ideas.

**Keywords:** Critical Literacy, Cognitive Skills, ESL, Democratic Participation, Parliamentary Mock-up

### Introduction

In the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), in gearing towards the aim of producing marketable human capital, the idea of mastering cognitive skills is given huge importance in creating a highly productive society for the purpose of flourishing the economy (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013). Cognitive skills such as creative thinking, reasoning, critical thinking and innovation are expected to be implemented in classroom teaching and learning process. The recent Standard-Based English Language Curriculum which was introduced in 2013 had integrated thinking skills into its curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2018). This has also given rise to the integration of language arts, creative and critical skills and also reasoning skills to be taught along with the teaching and learning of English in schools (Azman, 2016). This new curriculum ushers in significant shifts in approaches and styles of teaching at the grassroots level, focusing more on student-centeredness rather than the traditional teacher-centred teaching styles; it also presented challenges for teachers and school administration

into incorporating 21<sup>st</sup> century learning strategies, higher order thinking skills, creating dynamic learning spaces, and creating and utilising means and teaching aids that are more suitable and relatable to the set of students in the current world (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018).

The cognitive skills embedded in the new curriculum strongly echoes the ethos of critical literacy. While critical thinking requires reflecting and reasoning (Hughes et al., 2015), critical literacy involves constant practice of analysis and interrogation which is transferable between all features and conditions of texts (Comber, 2013). Critical literacy promotes novel and various perspectives in looking into issues, or texts and also the constant effort of analysis and suggestions for change and improvement to the status quo (Vasquez et al., 2019). At the same time, critical thinking skills focus primarily on determining the soundness of argument, to do this, one need to have verification skills, which is to question, analyse and interrogate arguments (Hughes et al., 2015), moreover, through critical literacy, learners are expected to be creative subjects who are constantly reflecting critically on the process of reading and writing, and at the same time to reflect on the significance of language (Freire, 1972). These characteristics of critical literacy resonated well with the expectations and visions of the current Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) in at least two of its six students' aspirations; which is bilingual proficiency and also thinking skills, towards the end of this paper, the intervention program carried out will encapsulate all six students' aspiration outlined by the Blueprint.

However, even with the idealistic concept of implementing cognitive skills in the curriculum, the implementation at the grassroot levels would tell a different story, the concept of 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, critical thinking skills, and higher order thinking skills is still unwelcomed by teachers in the classroom as Lim, Yunus, and Mohamad (2016) found that teachers are reluctant to implement these new strategies in school. Questions asked in tests and examinations in the primary level all over Malaysia are severely lacking in higher order thinking questions due to teachers not having any confidence with their students' abilities in answering them (Singh & Shaari, 2019). Nasir and Zainatunufus (2018) also found that teachers don't have the confidence level or the ability to implement or use the elements of higher order thinking skills or cognitive skills in classroom especially in secondary education in Malaysia. While teachers are constantly aware of the need of implementing cognitive skills in the classroom, they are very uncertain in the planning, implementing and most importantly assessing high order thinking skills and its development at a classroom level (Aziz et al., 2017). Dwee et al (2016) suggest that this lack of attention given to the integration and the teaching of cognitive skills might be because more attention is given to provide learners with tools to pass examinations. Examinations and assessments dictate what is usually to be taught in classroom (Roever & McNamara, 2006), and since the getting the right answer still is given more attention rather than the process of getting the right answer (Nambiar, 2019), cognitive skills will not be able to be given the attention it needs.

Keeping in mind of the relationship of thought and language posited by Hughes et al (2015), which is without language, the ability to express or to even have thoughts is obsolete; reasoning is unable to occur without thinking, thinking involves language, hence thought, regardless of it being critical or otherwise would directly influence language development and vice versa (Hughes et al., 2015).

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) is written to revolutionise the Malaysian Education System with the spirit to produce balanced human capitals who are globally marketable in order to achieve global economic prominence (Lim et al., 2016). Furthermore, Hughes et al (2015) pointed out that the environment, feelings, personality of which a learner have or experienced serve as context towards conveying the meaning of language. Keeping in mind of the relationship of thought and language posited by Hughes et al (2015), which is without language, the ability to express or to even have thoughts is obsolete; reasoning is unable to occur without thinking and this involves language, hence thought, regardless of it being critical or otherwise would directly influence language development and vice versa (Hughes et al., 2015). However, as has been explained in the previous paragraph, the work to realise the visions is not without its challenges; hence the vision to produce marketable human capital will be faced with obstructions. With regard to the necessity of such visions; it is believed that there is a need for a research to mitigate this setback in order to achieve the visions. This paper suggests a resolution in a form of intervention program which requires learners to be involved with democratic citizenship activities in a school setting. The activities in the program mirrors the ethos of critical literacy by selecting the process of general election and a forming of a government as “texts” to be “read” by the participants. The purpose of this study is to gauge the effects on learners’ critical literacy when integrating democratic citizenship activities in English Language Teaching and Learning. The effects of critical literacy pursued by this paper could be further characterised in three dimensions as had been explained by (Vasquez et al., 2019). Vasquez et al (2019) had illustrated the qualities learners would possess if critical literacy is fostered; learners who are exposed with critical literacy are better equipped to firstly (1) make informed decisions especially regarding issues on power dissemination and control, secondly learners would be able to (2) develop the ability to think ethically and critically.

## **Literature Review**

### *Critical Literacy and Critical Pedagogy*

Critical literacy is a concept that untangles unequal power relations, as such, one is required to critically think and reflect about the situation and circumstance around them in order to shape one’s functions in life (Shor, 1999; Vasquez, 2012; Abdul Aziz & Chang, 2021). According to Abdul Aziz and Chang (2021) “Critical literacy recognises the world we live in as texts imbued with power dynamics which determines our values and positions in society, and deserves to be examined, contested and reconstructed so we may create a more just and equal world (p.18). This is very similar to the aims of the Malaysia Education Blueprint which seeks to inculcate the critical thinking skills for the students in school in order for them to be able to use and apply the knowledge outside school academic context (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013). Rising with the advent of oppressive political regime in the early 1900s, critical theory concerned itself with the study of a world that is very much alienated by daily social circumstances and discourses of everyday lives (Gordon, 2012). This political idea would later inspire theories that is more pedagogical in nature (Vasquez et al., 2019). Critical pedagogy fundamentally helps deconstruct the idea of constraints which is established by a governing system or a social system by questioning and challenging social ideas and values, how beliefs could systematize realities or accepted truth and how people condition themselves and adapt into their lives within the reality in which they are in (Gordon, 2012).

There has been pedagogical practises which integrate critical literacies as interventions that exhibit the productive benefits of a sustained involvement between students and also the community (see LeBlanc & Welch, 2016; Ngo et al., 2016). With an opportunity for significant application of his theory, Paulo Freire, a proponent of critical literacy, organised for hundreds of sugarcane workers to be involved in systemic lessons integrated with critical pedagogy (Ooiwa-Yoshizawa, 2018). Critical pedagogy is also effective in developing learners' adaptability towards learning and also curriculum itself (Gordon, 2012). According to Gordon (2012), this idea of adaptability among learners is displayed when Sylvia Ashton-Warner employed what she would refer as "organic learning" to teach Maori children in New Zealand an Anglicized curriculum which the children resisted from learning. The "Organic Learning" engages vocabulary words from the children's community to teach language skills (Gordon, 2012). These are only a few instances of how critical literacy have inspired critical pedagogy in practice.

The instances given show a very important characteristics of critical literacy, that it is highly transferable, transgressive between curriculum, transformational between time and cultures and also highly pedagogical and pleasurable (Vasquez et al., 2019). According to Abednia and Crookes (2018), critical literacy and critical pedagogy could flourish well in any extensive cultural shifts or decades which have altered the values, attitudes and also the political climate of a community or a social setting. Apart from being transferable, critical literacy also features flexibility in enabling pedagogical curriculum to be adaptable to learners, the world, and everything it consists can be considered as a text to be read by learners (Vasquez et al., 2019). This means that any elements that seemed to form engagements towards the interests of the learners including issues, topics, learners' own experiences, any artefacts or even conversation within local communities can be used to build lessons, or curriculum aiming to bring significance in the learners' lives (Vasquez et al., 2019). This is demonstrated when Marsh (2016) from the United Kingdom who successfully guided a group of learners younger than five to create a virtual world using tablets, where the learners decided on their own on which application or media they would use to create virtual worlds using tablets. Marsh (2016) further reported critical reflections were in effect as the learners reviewed, produced and edited their creations based on their understandings. In order to be highly reflective, learners need to be invested and immersed within a lesson or a text, the success of this is contingent upon how much the learners are aware of their participation in the lesson or the text itself (Albers et al., 2019).

#### *Critical Literacy in English Language as a Second Language Teaching and Learning*

The previous section explained the flexibility and the adaptability of critical literacy and critical pedagogy which transcends culture and time. It is important to note the similarities it has with the vision of Malaysia's Education Philosophy. The students' aspirations outlined in the blueprint revolves around characteristics that a learner should gain after going through the education system in Malaysia; all learners should have access and become the recipient of knowledge equally, they also need to be proficient in at least two languages, develop sharp critical thinking skills, understand the concept of ethics and spirituality in order to face challenges as adults, to be able to lead effectively and efficiently and also develop a strong sense of national identity (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013). These aspirations share similarities to the ethos of critical literacy; according to Janks (2017), through education in

critical literacy, a learner will be able to interrogate “texts<sup>1</sup>” and understand the perspectives and the interests it serves in the world. After which, a learner should be informed in either to take similar positions posited by the “text” or to be against it. This process of deciding a moral decision requires an amount of reflection and critical thinking skills which will in turn create an independent thinker who can evaluate and solve problems readily (Rymanowicz, 2016).

In regards to teaching languages, it is important to note that language is indeed a complex singularity, a word in a language would bring within it a finite amount of meanings according to its context (Hughes et al., 2015). Spoken language, Hughes et al (2015) further noted is even more complex though it is more flexible; as its meaning depends on the slight change in tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions. Hence as the process of teaching and learning of the second language is implemented in a classroom, it is imperative to take note of learners’ cultural knowledge, their background knowledge of the world, and also multimodal and multilingual practises and integrate it into the building of curriculum and contents for language lessons (Vasquez et al., 2019). With this philosophy in mind, a certain consideration would be put in place in the creation of text for learners when incorporating critical literacies in classroom, as the most intriguing text in the classroom would be one about the students’ lives and how the engagement and responses to others’ words and actions and their views of the world (Dyson, 2001). Critical literacy is considered successful when learners use the knowledge gained from the texts read to reach an understanding of a certain issue (Nambiar, 2019), the meaning of texts, or understanding of certain issues will entail an ever-changing attitude as it will be influenced by learners’ experiences or their relational backdrops (Kim & Cho, 2017).

Dyson (2001) observed how teachers used plots and characters from popular culture to students of diverse backgrounds to access their knowledge of rules, roles and obligations. It was found that these characters and plots from popular culture reverberate differently among parents and children of different backgrounds. In one example given by Dyson (2001), the use of plays and storytelling helps learners to interact and reflect on a minor character in a 1992 action comedy film, “3 Ninjas”, learners then noted how their parents disprove of the film and categorised it as being too violent for young viewers. However, learners are fuelled by the opinions of peer relations, and their pleasure of addressing the idea of fairness for the minor character they are relating to against the backdrop of the film and also learners’ position in the real world. The strategy of assuming roles and characters in popular culture is also used by Kim and Cho (2017) as they give opportunities for preschool learners to create spaces for themselves within a children’s book. The preschool learners are instructed to discuss the stories, mostly western fairy tales, from a perspective of the villains. In the process, the learners engaged in a critical discussion with the teachers and among themselves as they had to challenge and evaluate the given text and its meanings. These strategies greatly affect how the learners perceive meanings of language as contextual features of the film and stories would influence the meaning of the language and also the understanding the learners eventually acquired, and this understanding is also contingent to the learners’ background knowledge and their nature of expectations as well (Hughes et al., 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> The word “text” should be understood as how Vasquez (2019) has defined under the context of critical literacy, which means the world and all elements within it can be viewed as “text”.

Rosenblatt (2004) posits that learners of language are constantly considering options about their way of thinking and reading, and this is always perceived from a critical standpoint. This would allow readers' background knowledge to interfere in their reading of texts which connect their understanding between ideas presented in the texts and also ideas of their own. In this respect, Martinez (2017) developed and introduced Critical Literacy Read-Alouds (CLRA) to her preschool learners. Martinez (2017) used traditional fairy tales and learners were asked to reflect on the plot of the stories based on the learners' lives. The comparisons between learners' lives and the lives of the characters in the fairy tales ignited and engaging conversation among the learners regarding equity and equality. Nambiar (2019) integrates critical literacy as an approach for tertiary English learners in which she provided learners with texts and learners were able to deconstruct meanings from the texts. Learners were expected to reproduce the texts in a form of a front cover of a parodied magazine of their own creation and the products clearly depicts the learner's thoughts regarding the various social issues presented to them, they even justified their thoughts based on researches done on their own accord. Nambiar (2019) reported that Critical Literacy helped learners to position the learners' being and existence and recognise their functions within the society and the social justice issues. This parallels Rosenblatt's (2004) view that the process of critical learning will enable readers of texts to be more than just readers, they play the roles of code breakers, meaning makers, users of texts, and also play the roles of text critics.

### **Methodology**

The researchers employed Action Research design for this study and particularly using the Kemmis and McTaggart Model; the nature of the model is reflective and it is a continuous iterative process (Altrichter et al., 2002). This is a valuable quality for the research since the researchers depend on continuous reflection process in designing, improving the program during implementation as well as in the process of implementation (Altrichter et al., 2002). As for the intervention program, the researchers employ Green's 3D Model of Literacy as an underlying theoretical framework. This multidimensional framework posits that there are three dimensions of literacy which happens simultaneously which is called operational, cultural and critical (Marsh, 2016). Operational is the learning of the structure of texts, secondly, cultural which is the moulding of language learning through how cultural learning could influence content learning and finally, the critical which describes the ways of how literacy could influence and become a perspectives in how they view the world (Vasquez et al., 2019). The researchers employed this model as it serves a useful linkage between literacy and culture and how it could help teach learners on how to be agents of social justice to serve others (Vasquez et al., 2019).

This study employs a qualitative research method. Data is collected through students' reflections at the end of the program and also researchers' observations, this is to gauge the students' critical cognitive skills through their products and their feelings. Since this study introduces an intervention program which combined critical literacy and the element of students' aspirations from the Malaysian Education Blueprint, a continuous assessment of students' progress needed to be done, hence the researcher's constant presence is needed for the activities.

### *Participants*

The study was carried out in a fully-residential school located in the Kluang district, in the state of Johor. The group of participants chosen for the study consists of 23 boys and 4 girls, 27 participants altogether, and all of them were between 15 to 17 years old, effectively in their final two years of secondary school. All participants came from middle class families. This group of participants were of mix abilities, but mostly they were of the low-ability spectrum. The teacher of this group of participants reported that the students were very passive in class and refused to participate or even answer questions the majority of the time, these are the reasons behind the choice of these 27 participants. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the participants in this study.

### *Design of Intervention Program*

This program incorporated the visions outlined by all six students' aspirations from the Malaysian Education Blueprint. The activities designed for the program integrates the upper secondary English syllabus under the Malaysian Education System and also elements of critical literacy. Through the program, students were expected to challenge and question their own knowledge and new knowledge that shape the Malaysian Governing System. The program was carried out in five phases altogether in the span of four weeks. Each phase consists of several sessions with various activities and the medium of instruction and participants' products were all done in English. With the political system as a content of the program, the participants learnt the mechanism of how a government is formed and at the same time improve their communication skills. Participants would role-play as candidates for constituencies, they would campaign and sit in a mock parliament as members of parliament. The constituencies were parts of their school compound, which is divided into 25 constituencies according to the geographical attributes. Learners would have to make relevant manifestos according to their constituencies. Care has been taken by the researchers to provide almost authentic materials to deliver as authentic an experience as possible for the participants. A group of 100 lower form students (aged 13 to 15) would role-play as citizens of constituencies which participants were going to compete in, their role was to only listen to the campaigns created by the candidates of their constituency and vote in the mock general election. It is important to note that these students were not the participants for this research, they are only an element in the design of the program to provide an authentic experience for the participants.

As the design of the framework entailed, observation was done reflectively by the researchers throughout the implementation of the program and at the end of the program, the participants were expected to write a reflection about their experiences during the program. The researchers would evaluate thoroughly the field notes and the reflections before coming to a conclusion.



The phases in the intervention is explained as follows

| Phase   | Details   |
|---------|---|
| Phase 1 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teacher explains the concept of how general election works.</li> <li>2. Session 1: Participants get into groups of four according to their own choice and brainstorm the identity of their political party.</li> <li>3. Session 2: Participants will decide and discuss on forming a coalition of parties, an agreement should be made until there are only two political parties competing.</li> </ol>   |
| Phase 2 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Session 1: Participants, now as candidates in the role play will announce their candidacy to the citizens of their constituencies.</li> <li>2. Session 2: Participants will campaign by presenting a speech of their manifestos to the citizens</li> </ol>  |
| Phase 3 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Session 1: Participants will learn of the results of the election; the losing candidates will compete again in a second election with new constituencies. (To ensure all participants will get a parliamentary seat for the sake of optimum participation)</li> <li>2. Session 2: Participants will negotiate for transfers of seats to create a majority in order for one coalition of parties to be declared as the government, and the other as the opposition.</li> </ol>   |
| Phase 4 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Session 1: Participants will discuss the appointment of cabinet ministers and members of the opposition</li> </ol>  |
| Phase 5 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Session 1: Participants are given a number to represent an amount of money to be distributed in an annual budgeting.</li> <li>2. Session 2: Parliament-in-Session 1 – Government will present an annual budget according to the number given and based on ministers and constituencies that exists.</li> <li>3. Session 3: Parliament-in-Session 2 – Debate regarding the budgeting</li> <li>4. Session 4: Parliament-in-Session 2 – Debate regarding arising matters</li> <li>6. Participants will write reflections on the whole experiences</li> </ol> |

### Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the tendency of learners in fostering critical literacy through the implementation of Democratic Citizenship program. Vasquez et al. (2019) posits that Critical Literacy when taught at a young age could help learners to (1) make an informed decision regarding issues of control and power and to (2) develop the ability to think and act critically and ethically. Through the intervention program, learners have shown growth in these two aspects, these conclusions are evident in learners' reflections and

learners' behaviour and products during the course of the program. The learners' growths are going to be presented according to two themes that was outlined by (Vasquez, 2019).

*Making an informed decision regarding issues of control and power*

As had been explained in the previous section, learners who joined this program had to go through role-playing activities where each of them had to create a political party, campaign in their constituencies, win an election, form a government, and debate in parliament sessions. In each of the 5 phases in this study, learners had to make countless decisions in order to ensure the survival of their political party and to uphold their promise during the parliament sessions. The most striking early on in the program; the learners spent a long-time discussing on what to say in their personal manifestos in order to ensure a win in their own constituency. They tried to appeal to the voters, who are their juniors, with references to popular culture such as the name "*Targaryen*" was used for a party in reference to the famous television series at the time, *Game of Thrones*. Another group wanted to appeal to the mostly female citizens of a constituency by using acronyms as the name of their party, to mirror the famous Korean Pop Group, BTS. This idea of learning and studying the environment or as Vasquez (2019) would refer to as "text" showcase an understanding of issues and how it relate to the learners' world and backdrop, which is in the same lines of how critical literacy is manifested according to (Kim and Cho, 2017).

Learners would later realise that they need larger numbers in their political party in order to be made into a government. Hence, they started to negotiate between each other to ensure that people of different parties would transfer into their parties, this is to make their numbers larger in order to ensure bigger opportunities to win the government. This is evidenced by the written reflections done by Fami, "*Me and my friends tried our best to persuade them (a smaller party) to make a coalition.*" Fami went on to describe his success of enlarging their numbers; "*Our hard work of persuading them paid off when the president of the party announced that he had accepted the terms of the negotiation.*" This idea of realising the need to negotiate in order to maintain power and control shows that the learners realised their functions in the assumed role and actively think of the best solution in order to manage the power that they have, in lined with Nambiar (2019), who found that students of tertiary education became more aware of their functions in society in regards to social justice issues.

The process of negotiations went on in all phases to come, after the general elections phase, none of the coalition managed to get enough majority to form a government. However, the learners showed critical literacy when again, they decided to go on with the process of negotiations in influencing those who held seats in parliament to join their party or coalition. They considered their options and chose people to approach with specific reasons. This is evidenced by Su's written reflection; "*we approached Izz because we know that he just wanted to be in a party that holds the government, he was the first person we approached.*" Another learner, Husin said in his reflection, "*Azim had wanted to be the minister of youth and sports, so we offered him the position if he decided to join our party.*" This shows that there is a constant process of negotiations amongst the learners and they were engaged in a series of critical discussions among themselves in order to understand the concept of distribution of power in a democratic process. This shows that the learners involved with this program developed an agency in challenging and evaluating the situations around them

according to what they found most profitable in their situation based on their understanding of the world (Kim & Cho, 2017; Vasquez et al., 2019).

As this is a very social program, whereby interactions constantly happened between learners as they go on with the program, learners' showed maturity in handling conflicts beyond their years in which they decided to understand the whole concept of the conflict before making any decision, as evidence from the reflection written by Wan, the president of the losing political party; *"I as the party leader had faced a lot of challenges, one by one members of my party are betraying my party, I have to keep a cool head even though my brain was about to explode, I need to understand the terms of negotiations on why they left my party, before I matched that negotiations to get them back."* The researchers observed that the learners did not resort to a fight in these situations, rather they decided to talk and negotiate in the process to get enough information before they take any course of action. The president of the winning party, Hana, also made a few difficult decisions; she noticed that one of the members of her own coalition, Azmi, showed signs of being swayed in joining another coalition. Realising that Azmi's position may be detrimental for the future of her own coalition, Hana decided to set a meeting with the members of her own coalition and finally decided to remove Azmi from her coalition. This shows that she had the awareness to consult others, gather enough information before making a difficult decision. As evidenced by her written reflection; *"I won't be able to make that decision alone, I had to consult the rest of my committee members to make sure that I was doing the right thing."* This shows that critical literacy is fostered when learners are making sense of their socio-political functions and set up discourse, such as gathering information and setting up a meeting, to tackle issues which would enable them to love their lives in more or less powerful way than before (Albers et al., 2019; Vasquez, 2012; Vasquez et al., 2019).

Learners who were involved with this project claimed to have a better understanding of democratic process, it is important to note that the legal voting age in Malaysia had been lowered from 21 to 18 years old (Mat, 2019; Leong, 2020), hence it is very imperative for the youth around the age of the participants chosen for this activity to be well informed with the knowledge regarding democratic system, since they will be able to register to vote as soon as they finish school. Learners developed a more critical standpoint towards viewing democratic process in which they appreciate the importance of choosing leaders of a government. As evidenced by the written reflection by Fiq; *"I was never interested to learn about government in my country, now I think I learn how a leader should manage a country to be a better country, this (program) has opened my mind about the responsibility to take care of my country."* Mirul, in his written reflection said, *"Forming a government is not an easy task, we need teamwork and commitment."* Amir reflected that *"This (program) made me want to know more about the election process of our country, I thought it was easy, but it wasn't."* In another reflection by Zuan, he said; *"This activity gives me a lot of knowledge about politics and government in my country, I learnt how to be a good politician and now I think I could give many benefits as a citizen of this country."* A reflection written by Hana rounded up this idea well, she reflected that *"everyone should learn who to choose as their leader wisely after this, because it is not an easy task."* In line with Vasquez et al.'s (2019) claim that as learners foster and develop critical literacy, they will develop and recognise their functions in society and realise their role as a citizen in a democracy. This idea is parallel to the original focus of critical literacy during Freire's campaign in the 1960s in raising awareness to the oppressed sugar cane workers in

Brazil, which is to empower them and liberate their minds to think on how to make decisions, and weigh in information from all sides to arrive to a conclusion which is both informed and independent of extraneous or biased opinions (Freire, 1972; Ooiwa-Yoshizawa, 2018; Vasquez et al., 2019).

#### *Developing the Ability to Think and Act Critically and Ethically*

The researchers observed early on as the negotiations in transferring parliament seat was happening, unethical behaviour appears and it was the role of the facilitator to explain that this behaviour was unacceptable in a democratic process; instead of negotiations with terms and contracts within the activity of the program, they put in actual food as parts of terms in their negotiations, this is tantamount to a bribe, which was immediately remedied by the facilitator by informing the learners of the true nature of the exchange. While this incident shows that learners were successful in integrating their real life knowledge and experience into deconstructing the problem they have in front of them, which is in line with what Rosenblatt (2004) posited to happen when learners are presented with opportunities such as this, however to act ethically was also a part of the learning process intended with fostering critical literacy through the program, hence learners learnt the difference between negotiating terms and offering bribery. Zim reflected in his reflection; *“I honestly had no idea that offering Maggie (instant noodle brand) to him was considered bribery in this kind of situation, I learnt something new from this.”*

Issue of women’s rights was also explored in this program, while the researchers fully intends to bring forth the idea of social justice in terms of giving opportunities for the oppressed – in this situation, youths – to be given voice, however, it is interesting to see that the learners themselves brought forth the idea of women’s rights when they elected a female participants to be the Prime Minister. The learners involved in this project consists of 27 students and only four of the participants were female. Being a minority, it is interesting that a class filled with male learners would elect a female as the Prime Minister. According to Janks and Vasquez (2011), when learners understand the relationship between power and order, they would take transformative social actions in creating a more equitable social order. Hana, the female Prime Minister reflected in writing; *“Although there are a lot of boys in this class, but I was elected as the Prime Minister. I think this is a heavy responsibility and I know my gender is not a reason for me to not be a leader of the party.”* The male learners shared their opinions about Hana’s premiership, saying that her gender was not an issue as she was the best candidate to be the Prime Minister. Fami reflected; *“Hana is bright and smart, there is no reason why a girl couldn’t lead us.”* Rif was surprised when asked during an interview about how he felt about Hana’s premiership; *“She is the best candidate, I don’t see her gender as an issue.”* This shows that the learners are empowered in bringing a positive social change in creating a more democratic society, this is in line with the findings by Tohidian and Taskoh (2020), in their research aiming on empowering women in Iran, they found that critical literacy which promotes equity would create a bigger social change it will affect their actions in the future.

It is observed that the learners also developed independent thinking that is critical based on their experience in the program. As all learners were required to make decisions on their own in all phases of the program, they became more comfortable with making conclusions without bias of peer pressures and more aware of their own responsibilities in making the world a better place. As evidenced by Azim; *“Betrayals can happen as all humans are greedy, so we*

*must always be aware of any possibilities that can happen in our lives... I also learnt that we must fight for what we believe in and for justice.”* This means that the learners are realising their responsibilities and their functions in a society and the role that they have to play in managing issues such as power, responsibility and justice (Nambiar, 2019). It is normal to see learners integrating themselves with the “text” given to them with the context of Critical Literacy in order to create or achieve a new understanding about life, as design of the “text” provides opportunities for transformations (Vasquez et al., 2019). Rosenblatt (2004) had also suggested that “text” which provides opportunities for such transformation is highly immersive and would enable learners to be more than just readers but also meaning makers, hence giving them opportunity to make sense of their position in the world. This is evidenced by Lia’s written reflection; *“Sometimes we need to be selfish and fight for what we believe and sometimes we also need to make sacrifices for the sake of what we believe in.”*

### **Conclusion**

This study explores how learners engaged with a democratic citizenship program in fostering critical literacy in learning through English language teaching. The researchers strongly believe that exploring complex ideas such as democratic process and democratic participation would help learners in fostering critical literacy in their learning. Through the program, the study aims to gauge if the learners involved fostered critical literacy based on two criteria outlined by Vasquez (2019) which is the ability to make informed decisions especially regarding issues on power dissemination and control and the development of the ability to think ethically and critically. The study reveals that the program help integrates learners’ background with the subject matter presented at hand, this shows that critical literacy is employed when learners played a bigger role than just learners and became meaning makers and became critics of societal value from a larger and more critical standpoint. Learners also showed signs through their written reflections of enlightenment of social issues and how to approach such issues with a more renewed and critical attitude. This shows that the democratic citizenship program manages to create space for learners to explore issues that is not usually discussed in the classroom, and this would equip learners with proper tools to be more functional citizens in the future, especially now youths as young as 18 in Malaysia can hold the power to vote. The program also engages learners into a more pleasurable way in discussing complex ideas such as power and control in a safer, more ethical environment. In the effort of the Education System to produce more marketable human capitals, the programs fosters critical thinking skills, problems solving skills while at the same time providing opportunities for learners to gain autonomy in making decisions, to act in an ethical manner and also build appreciation of being the citizen of Malaysia.

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