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Group Name: MiGrant Dreams

Category 2B - Language Arts

1. Introduction: Rationale and Research Questions

Rationale:

Many individuals, especially our target audience, Singaporean students, are all too familiar with having a privileged, easy-going background. Comfortable in their own insulated bubble, they often lack the exposure to the underprivileged, even those right beside us - foreign domestic workers.

Many often have a severe lack of knowledge and understanding of these foreign domestic workers, and disregard the fact that they are human beings as well, just like you and me. They have their own unique identity, unique past and unique emotions as well. However, constantly distracted by the various electronic devices and technology all around us, constantly barraged by our academic test results and graded assignments, we often forget the personal side of foreign domestic workers.

They are merely treated as mechanical emotionless robots, carrying out our chores and tending to our whims and fancies upon beckoning. They are looked down upon as inferior, simply “not smart enough to get a proper job”. This problem is especially prevalent nowadays, due to the lack of proper focus on the real lives, their real emotions, and the real situation these domestic workers face. Existing media outlets, like newspapers, only focus on the most extreme, “violent abuses”, often due to the corporate incentive of media organisations to sensationalise news to maximise viewership. This neglects the much needed spotlight on the daily struggles and daily thoughts they truly have. Our project shines this light.

Research Questions:

1. How do mainstream media outlets portray the situation faced by foreign domestic workers?
2. What has been done to raise awareness on the problems foreign domestic workers face?
3. How can we present foreign domestic workers as unique individuals and raise awareness on their daily struggles and emotions?

2. Research Methodology

With reference to our first research question, we analysed how current mainstream media portrays the situation faced by foreign domestic workers by researching on 30 recent articles from reliable media outlets like the Straits Times. Firstly, using these sources, we analysed what the key focuses of these articles are by categorising them into 3 areas - Governmental Policies, Courts and Crime, and Social Commentary. This allowed us to review what the general trend of these articles were. Secondly, we took a Corpus Linguistics approach to these articles. We conducted a keyword analysis of these articles to identify words relating to immense grievous harm, such as “death”, “beaten”, “harmed” etc. By reviewing the frequency of these keywords, we were able to identify whether these articles focused on the extreme cases of abuse or the daily struggles domestic workers face.

For our second research question, we looked at this issue in two areas, governmental policies and measures taken by external organisations such as websites and blogs etc. We looked for previously implemented policies and articles written so that we would be able to examine the past measures taken by such organisations, as well as their limitations and disadvantages. By doing so, we could identify where current measures were missing out on and could craft our products to fill the gaps.

For our final research question, we decided that in order to raise awareness on their daily struggles and emotions, we needed to learn about them first. Thus, we conducted an interview on foreign domestic workers from different countries - Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar, by going to places they commonly conjugate at, like Lucky Plaza, Golden Mile, Paya Lebar etc. With the objective of obtaining authentic firsthand accounts to base our stories on, we asked about their own personal feelings and experiences by targeting our questions at 3 areas - Their past, present, and future. Questions included “Did you have any aspirations as a child?” (Past), “What is your life like here?” (Present), “What do you plan to do upon returning home?” (Future)

We knew that this process would be challenging, as foreign domestic workers would be unwilling to reveal too much information and would not want to waste their own time. Therefore, we first explained the rationale behind this project so that they would be willing to help and avoided asking intrusive questions. Rather, we attempted to engage in a friendly conversation, instead of restricting it to an interview, allowing us to fulfill our objective.

We learnt that many of them had to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of the family, and since young, had to constantly work part-time jobs to make ends meet. Despite these struggles, many still had aspirations, one even hoping to become a police officer. (Past) They also complained that being a domestic worker was exhausting, having to stay up as late as 1am, but felt that the money they earned was worth it. (Present) Lastly, they planned on returning home after a few years, some even wanting to start a small business of their own. (Future)

3. Literature Review

Research Question 1:

From our research of the articles, we learnt that 42% of articles focused on Governmental Policies while 34% focused on Courts and Crime. Evidently, the majority of articles did not directly talk about the daily struggles of foreign domestic workers but rather, existing measures

and extreme cases.

Our keyword analysis further shows the mainstream media's focus on the extreme cases due to its sensationalist nature. Over 6% of keywords in articles were related to immense grievous harm, comparatively higher than grammar words like "the" (4.5%) and "a" (2.7%). Clearly, there is an overemphasis on extreme cases of abuse. This deviates from real-life scenarios and takes away needed empathy and focus on the personal side of domestic workers.

Our product uses information obtained from our interviews to instead, showcase the personal lives of these foreign domestic workers through creative literature pieces, portraying them in a unique way, rather than talking about existing measures and extreme cases, vastly divergent from mainstream media outlets.

Research Question 2:

We found out that there were governmental policies taken against extremely serious issues like abuse, eg. policies from MOM such as ensuring they have adequate food and rest. We then examined the measures by external organisations and found out that currently, not many external organisations or people do much to benefit or discuss about foreign domestic helpers. However, there are some individual articles regarding this but most of such articles only focus on problems such as work issues etc. , which do not adequately represent the individual voice of the domestic helper. For example, SAGE publications has shared several articles about their living experiences. Even so, such articles focused mainly on things such as mistreatment and lack of living space, again re-emphasising the problem that we had identified. Our products ignite these lost voices and individuality of domestic workers through stories.

4. Content

We identified a key area of focus for our story (Past, Present, Future), decided on the specific message we wanted to convey for each story and based them on the interviews that we had conducted. Then, we carefully planned out a story incorporating various literary elements like

similes, metaphors etc.

Stories focused on the past featured the childhood dreams and aspirations of foreign domestic workers and the struggles they had to face from young. On the present, we described their current work conditions, and crucially, their feelings and thoughts. On the future, we crafted stories based on whether they wanted to return home and what they hoped to accomplish.

(Past + Present)

A sudden jerk woke her up. Her eyes, opened as wide as saucers, and darted around frantically. “What’s going on now” she murmured to herself. The plane shook unstably, and dipped down sharply, at times nearly swerving out of control. Instantly, her heart started palpitating furiously against her ribcage, like a trapped bird trying to get out of its cage. Fear gripped her in a choke-hold, as frantic thoughts filled her mind. “What will happen, is it safe...”

Her chaotic mess of thoughts was interrupted by an announcement about “light turbulence” - a word sounding like Greek to her. Everyone else seemed so relaxed, some even sleeping peacefully, yet she was glancing around, anxiety coursing through her veins, wondering why everyone seemed cool as a cucumber

(Excerpt from *Flight*, a story about a domestic helper’s thoughts and reactions to events on a plane to Singapore)

We utilised similes, personification and juxtaposition to display the multitude of difficulties and challenges a foreign domestic worker faces in a completely different and unfamiliar work environment so that readers can be more empathetic towards them.

Furthermore, we humanise these foreign domestic workers by illustrating their emotions, in this case her strong sense of fear and terror through similes and vivid descriptions. (“her eyes, opened as wide as saucers”), along with an obvious contrast from the people around her as the flight undergoes turbulence (“cool as a cucumber”).

We also describe the simple struggles foreign domestic workers face on a daily basis, struggles that may seem like regular practises for us. E.g. light turbulence is a common occurrence on plane flights, but it is something that these foreign domestic workers find petrifying. Therefore, this story humanises foreign domestic workers and creates empathy for daily struggles they face.

(Present)

Her family members had more than three meals a day. her daughter started school a month ago; her ailing mother purchased the medicine she needed - life was heaven, almost golden and shining.

Maybe, it was not so worth it to be the sacrificial lamb. To have all her dreams and personal life vanish in an instant with the flight ticket to Singapore. To carry the heavy burden of the collective blood and sweat from 7 people in a roof thousands of kilometres away. To have her wings clipped as she stares into the dim sunlight outside; To be different, secluded and isolated, almost like hell.

(Excerpt from *Calling Back*, a story based on a foreign domestic worker calling back home)

This story is based on an interview where a domestic worker said that she came from the Christian enclaves of Southern Thailand. In this story, we deliberately made use of religious symbols (“sacrificial lamb”, “golden and shining” “heaven”, “wings clipped”) to convey 2 key messages. Firstly, these religious symbols illustrate how the freedom of these foreign domestic workers are often restricted due to the nature of their jobs and shows that various trade-offs they have to make in the pursuit of earning money. Secondly, these symbols link to the unique identity and background of this foreign domestic worker, portraying them as individuals like you and I. Furthermore, juxtaposition is once again used (“heaven”, “hell”) to show the struggles they face in a metaphorical way.

5. Conclusion

So, why is our project titled miGrant Dreams? Well, we showcase their dreams, aspirations, personal lives and true emotions in a unique and different way.

We target a different audience. Existing websites and articles often target the general public, we create literature pieces that appeal to teenagers, who would be intrigued by these articles and share our message with friends and family.

We use a different medium. Existing websites bore audiences with walls of text and numerous statistics. We present creative pieces written beautifully with the help of our interviews and literary techniques.

We adopt a different perspective. Existing media outlets focus on the extreme, or on existing policies and measures. We showcase the personal lives of these foreign domestic workers and their daily struggles and true emotions.

Different, different, different.

We shine a different light on the personal lives of these foreign domestic workers.

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Thank you!

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