English Language Competency among Malaysian Children: A Socialisation Process

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Abstract

In many countries, the practice of teaching a second language is treated like teaching a subject matter that needs to be mastered; that there is a syllabus to be completed without fail and is tested for grammar accuracy. However, language is social and therefore language learning should be interpreted as a socialisation process; particularly when it is taught at a young age. This sets the purpose of the study presented and discussed in this paper - to demonstrate that language learning is a socialisation process. Hence, an Ethnographic Case Study approach was employed as it enabled a close exploration of the lived experiences of young children. Three children aged six, their mothers and classroom teacher were purposively as the participants in this study. Data was gathered through interviews and triangulated with classroom and home observations. Themes and codes were developed and analysed through the grounded theory constant comparative data analysis process. Validity and reliability measures included triangulation, member-checking, rigouressness and trustworthiness in reporting the data. Findings indicate that the children '*got*' the language at play; through language use as they interacted with others and their environment. This highlighted the socialisation process. It implies that language is a tool of communication which is to be used, not memorised. Hence, it should not be taught as a subject at schools or institutions. Instead, it should be used as the medium of socialisation in the teaching and learning process of subject matters such as History where it involves telling stories or in Sports Education where sports is an internationally shared interest.

Keywords: socialisation, English Language competency, Second Language Acquisition, Ethnographic, Malaysian children

Introduction

The teaching of a second language is always treated as teaching a subject matter. However, language is social because it is a social practice, a social accomplishment and a social tool (Everett 2012; Weitzman 2013). This implies that the teaching and learning of a language; be it a first or second or foreign or another language should not be perceived or interpreted and implemented like the teaching and learning of other subject matters. It is the aim of this paper to demonstrate that second language acquisition and learning should be perceived as a socialisation process by presenting and discussing a part of a study on exploring young Malaysian children's second language acquisition experiences. Hence, this paper begins with a brief literature on second language acquisition and the language learning context in Malaysia. This is followed by the description of the methodological concerns of the study. Then, the presentation and discussion of the findings follow with an aim to illustrate the socialisation process experienced by the young Malaysian children. The paper ends with implications and recommendations which may be beneficial for further research and discussion as well as pedagogy or policy implications.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The theoretical frameworks adopted for this study are Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (cited in Lantolf 2000) and Atkinson's (2002) socio-cognitive approach to second language acquisition. The theories indicate that language

acquisition requires both the social context and learners' cognitive ability. Lantolf (2000) further argued that language is a tool for humans to think with and make use of when interacting either with themselves, or with other human beings or with the physical world around them. According to Lantolf (ibid:80):

"higher forms of human mental activity are mediated… and use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves. …symbolic tools are artefacts created by human culture(s) over time… Included among symbolic tools are numbers and arithmetic systems, music, art, and above all, language".

A sociocultural perspective views language acquisition as a social process that language is acquired through the socialisation process in which learners attempt to be accepted by the members of the community they are in. In other words, language is acquired through interactions with 'expert' members (of the target language) in the community. This is the language socialisation strand (Zuengler and Miller, 2006).

Meanwhile, according to the sociocognitive approach (Atkinson 2002), there are several concepts about language acquisition. First, language is learned in interaction, often with more capable social members. This includes teachers, peers, mentors, role models, friends, family members, and significant others. Although interaction may not involve conversation in all cases, it would certainly entail the deep, holistic investments of learners in learning activities, and most importantly, the learners are seen as active agents, not passive recipients. Second, language and its acquisition is fully integrated into other activities, people and things. They are seen as discourses, composed of people, objects and of activities such as talking, acting, interacting, thinking, believing, valuing, writing, reading, and interpreting (Gee, 2014). In other words, language is seen in terms of its rich ecological, contextual or relational worldliness

and complexity rather than its simplicity, parsimony and autonomy (Pennycook 1994). Third, language and its acquisition are seen in terms of action and participation. What this means is that an individual would acquire a language not just because he or she wants to acquire the language but, because he or she needs the language to act or participate in the world. Similarly, this is the reason why and how a child acquires its L1. This accounts for L2 acquisition too. Finally, a sociocognitive approach to SLA does not diminish a view of language as either cognitive or social; it argues for the profound interdependency and integration of both the cognitive and socio aspects of language and its acquisition (Atkinson, 2002). Literature also shows that learners bring with them various social factors into the language classroom and that they interact with each other and may have an impact on their SLA process (Gass 1997; Breen 2001).

Tying up both theories and literature is that studies on SLA should include the notions of language and its acquisition as a process that involves both a child's cognition and its social surroundings. The cognition can be viewed as a bank of internal linguistic knowledge or competence, which the child needs to enable him/her to act in his/her social world. This cognition is also influenced by the socio interactions as experienced by the child. What is experienced by a child is also very much influenced or affected by his/her culture; including other individuals and objects around the child. Linguistic knowledge alone is not sufficient for the child to be able to act, participate or interact in its world. What, when, why and how to act with the linguistic knowledge the child has is determined by the child's knowledge or competence of the socio aspects of language. In addition, a language learner would have to play the role of agents of his/her own learning where it will influence the effort he/she puts in the socialisation process as well as in facing the challenges he/she encounters; as discovered in Saazai et.al's (2016) study. In other words, it is not possible to say that language and its

acquisition (be it L1 or L2) can be seen as either one (cognitive) or the other (social act).

Another concept that needs to be considered when discussing about language learning is related to Cummins (2008) concept of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Proficiency (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The distinction made is that BICS entails the fluency one has in communicating in the language; or conversational fluency. BICS does not focus on accuracy of language aspects. CALP however involves students' ability to use the language in understanding and expressing their thoughts and ideas in the learning process. This requires a more cognitively demanding language competency as it requires accuracy of language aspects to ensure that the messages conveyed or disseminated are accurately interpreted. What this implies is that for young children, the teaching and learning of English language for young children the focus should be on developing the children's basic interpersonal communicative skills.

English Language Learning Experience for Malaysian Children

For all Malaysian students, they would have experienced learning English formally between six to eleven years; that is from elementary schools (six years from the age of six to eleven) to secondary schools (five years from the age of thirteen to seventeen). This is because English is taught as a compulsory subject that is assessed at the school and national levels. Although according to the National Curriculum, English is to be taught for communicative purposes, in practice, the pedagogical approach to English language teaching is very structured. Teachers tend to employ drills and memorization of the rules and structures, even vocabulary items in their teaching. This is to ensure success at the school and national level examinations. Students have to memorise all the lexical items as separate entities, which are then applied to the rules that have been memorised. By doing so, it is expected that students would be able to

speak and write 'correctly' or 'accurately'. As a result, most Malaysian children use English only in the classroom during the English lessons. Hence, it is a norm to have students who score highly in English in the school and national examinations but may not speak in English. Also, there would be students who are interested in English and know the importance of English and acknowledge the role of the language but are not successful language learners.

Despite the number of years learning English, school students' performance in the subject in the national standardized examination – *Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia* (*SPM*) which further affected their employability as indicated in the 2005 survey by JobStreet.com (a Malaysian employment agency) involving 3300 human resource personnels and employers showed that one of the factors relating to graduate unemployment is their weakness in English (56 percent) (Kementerian PendidikanTinggi 2012). Employers reported that although the fresh graduates are highly qualified, they are not proficient in English (ibid 2012). Various efforts have been taken. For instance, the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (*PPSMI*). This was implemented with the hope that Malaysian students' English can be improved by acquiring the language through learning these two core subjects. Most current effort is the implementation of the policy of Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language (*MBMMBI*).

Hence, in response to this issue, it is hoped that the study discussed in this paper will illuminate that perhaps the answer to the issue lies in the teaching and learning process. Perhaps, the teaching and learning of the language should be approached as a socialisation process to help improve students' English language proficiency.

Methodology

This study employed an interpretive approach; also known as qualitative or naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). More specifically,

the research design employed was Ethnographic Case Study. This is in line with the theoretical underpinnings of this study, that reality is viewed as being socially constructed, where the behaviours of individuals are being continuously interpreted to give meaningful explanation to behaviours in a particular context (Greene, 2000). As noted by Radnor (2002), knowledge is obtained through the interpretive process, through the researcher's encounters with the subjects, and interpreting the views expressed by the participants.

The main cases of the study were three six year old Malaysian children named Azlan, Hazwan and Aida (pseudonyms) who were purposively selected. To ensure that these children were experiencing similar formal English language learning, the children were chosen from the same school and classroom. The children were interviewed and observed at school and home. In addition, the children's mothers and class teacher were interviewed. The observations and interviews with their significant others were also measures to ensure validity of the data via triangulation. The children were interviewed individually and as a group. Interviews were tape-recorded and several observations were video-taped and used to stimulate recall in the interviews with the children. All adult participants gave a written consent and their identities were kept anonymous. Parents' consent included their children's participation in the study. In addition, it needs to be noted that interviewing the children was not as clear cut as it was with interviewing the adults. Hence, interviews with the children became concurrent with observations; that is when the children's were not answering the questions or were not willing to respond, they were observed instead. Taking children's reaction in conducting a research is also a means of gaining their consent to participate (Brooker 2001). A total of 21 interviews, 19 classroom observations and 12 home observations were carried out.

The amount of data analysed in this study was quite substantial; amounting to 38 hours of classroom observations, 11 hours of interviews with children, 6 hours with parents and 2 hours with the teacher. Hence, a grounded theory data analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1994) process was employed. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews with themes identified were given to the adult participants for member-checking to ensure validity of the data. Meanwhile, the reliability was ensured via constant comparative analysis and rigouressness of the analysing process as well as trustworthiness in reporting the data. That is, the participants' responses were used in reporting the findings.

Results and Discussion

When asked about her views on SLA, the teacher said that the children's English language acquisition is;

"natural… it's what sounds right … that's how they pick up grammar earlier. The grammar teaching becomes more formal further up in the school. The children are basically, from their experience …listening and using words they've learned … using sentences in their writing and speaking activity … the work in the activity area will promote them speaking where perhaps where they're not quite confident in the classroom they are more encouraged to speak out there … that's particularly important." *(Interview Teacher)*

The children's teacher felt that the children 'picked up' the language through their interactions with each other while participating in the classroom activities; as there were no formal teaching and learning of English in the classroom. Language was taught through literacy subject and since the medium of instruction was English, the children had the exposure to the language and opportunity to use the language.

Similarly, findings from the interviews with the children's mothers imply that English was also acquired informally and not formally as indicated by the themes in the following Table 1. The themes appear to be very social-based;

that the children acquired English from their own experiences, through the language use at home and school, the children's parents' help, the activities the children participated in, their peers/ siblings' influence, the school/teaching, and the children's characteristics such as being *observant*.

TABLE 1: Interview With Mothers

Extract	Themes
From school. They (children) pick up very easily from school, even the pronunciation…the 'slang'…they pronounce a with an /a/ accent… like at school.(Interview Parent 1 – Phase 1)	children's SLA experience
Sometimes he asks in English and sometimes in Malay. Now mostly in English. (Interview Parent 2 Phase 1)	language used
I do encourage him. As he speaks more English, we speak more English to him. Before he was just starting to acquire the language so we mixed both languages but now he is beginning to speak more English so we are speaking more English with him (Interview parent 1)	parents' help (contribution)
In terms of writing …not that much because he likes to draw… but if it's reading …it's a lot …he can read on his own now …when he comes home, he'll read on his own … a lot… more fluent than before … like he's confident. (Interview Parent 2)	activities
School environment contributes a lot… all her friends are English….I feel the school environment… I mean her friends, teachers. (Interview Parent 3)	peer influence
With his brother, he speaks English. His brother does not quite understand but he can use it (younger brother aged 4; Interview Parent 2)	siblings influence
*I feel the teacher has helped a lot. The teacher knows that Malaysia children do not have much English background so she gave time for the children to acquire the language. I feel her teacher does not seem to rush into things…like she looks at a child's phase….there's a lot of activities where the children think a lot. (*Interview Parent 3)	school/teaching
I think they are more observant. They observe, they just like …ok..ok…so they know the new words. (Interview Parent 1)	children's characteristics

When asked about how they acquired English, the children did not specifically describe their SLA experiences at home. Nevertheless, their responses about the activities that they did at home and the home observations of the children's activities show that the children were getting on with their lives like other children. The children were observed doing activities of the popular culture such as playing the play-station and watching television programmes particularly cartoon shows that were popular at that time. They were experiencing SLA from the activities they were doing at home. Although these children were living in a Malaysian home setting where their cultural practices were maintained; because they were living in the target language country, they had more exposure to the language than if they were in their home country. Apart from attending a mainstream school, the children were exposed to the language through the media such as the television, computer, Play-station and also printed materials (the books they read).

The children were describing the activities that they were doing in which the target language was used. Azlan said that he learnt through *voice, games* like *puzzle* and *computer*. Although he did not mention computer as an activity he likes doing at home, Azlan was always observed doing some activities on the computer. That may explain why he felt that he learnt English from the computer. Meanwhile Hazwan said that he learnt English through *writing*, *computer* and *television*. Observations of Hazwan at home showed that Hazwan watched television more than he did any written work or activities with the computer. Meanwhile Aida responded that she acquired English through *activity*, *play* and *computer*. Perhaps, she said this because as observed, she spent most of her time watching television or video. The language of these activities was English. Aida was also observed using some English while playing with her younger brother. Aida's response about the computer refers to her use of it at school because Aida was not observed using a computer during the home visits. This could also show that Aida

was repeating the response she heard from Azlan and Hazwan. This behaviour confirms her response when she said that she '*copies*' her friends. In addition, the children said that they followed their friends and communicated in English the most with their friends, listened to and followed their teacher; and they were observed listening to and imitating the language heard and making guesses in trying to understand what they heard. These may be seen as their ways of acquiring the language because they had to use their own ways to understand the English words, phrases and sentences that they heard and produce their responses in English. The children's short responses show that they were unable to describe more about their SLA experiences. This indicates that they were not thinking about acquiring another language or that they may not be aware that they were experiencing SLA. Perhaps, because they were not attending a formal language class to learn about English, they did not perceive that the process they were undergoing was a process of SLA. Nevertheless, language learning and language acquisition did take place.

If at school the children were using L2 in their interactions with their friends and teacher; at home they were using English with their parents and siblings; although the amount of English used varied. They were also using the language as they watched television in English, played games in English and read books in English. They also maintained using the language in their interactions with other Malaysian children as evident in the informal observations. The children's SLA experiences were therefore influenced by the activities they did at home, the amount of interaction in English they received and the media they utilized at home. In other words, the children were going on with their lives as children in an environment where they had more exposure to the target language and more opportunity to use it; thus acquiring a second language while socializing in their social world at home.

Relating these findings to the theories of SLA,

the use of English in all these activities and interactions indicates that the SLA process these children were experiencing should be interpreted as a social process. What the children experienced may not be a learning process for them but they did acquire the language. This reflects the discussion on language acquisition and learning being social processes as presented in the literature chapter. This interpretation is further made explicit by the parents when they said that their children 'picked up' the language through their observations of the school environment, friends and teachers as presented in the findings; indicating that the children were acquiring the second language through informal learning; as they socialised with their peers and as they got on with their lives at school and at home in the UK.

This finding also reflects the discussion in the review of literature that showed how studies on young children have come from various fields which foreground either the role of cognitive or social aspects that have an impact on the process of SLA. The literature shows a movement from cognitively oriented to socially oriented studies on SLA among young children. More current development of research in SLA also shows a move towards embracing the sociocultural perspectives of understanding the language acquisition process.

This view of SLA through 'picking up' could also be interpreted as naturalistic acquisition (Ellis, 1999). It was natural because English was the language of instruction, the common language used by others in the school; and as the children wanted to get on with their lives at school, they had to acquire the language. Similarly, Hazita's (2009) study on English in 1Malaysia concluded with the need for contextualising the acquisition of English as a social process to create a community of practice and ensure naturalisation of English in rural Malaysia. This is in line with Krashen's (1982) notion that language acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language through natural communication in which the speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the message they are conveying and understanding.

Conclusion and Implication

The study set off to explore young children's SLA experiences and understand from their perspectives what is entailed in the process. What has emerged from the grounded theory analysis of the data is that for these young Malaysian children, SLA is not about acquiring or learning a second language per se but it is about 'getting on' with life where the language is used as a social tool in their social world. All these indicate the complexity of the SLA process and the complexity in trying to understand how young children experience the process of acquiring another language. SLA among young learners goes beyond solely cognitively or socially oriented theories of language acquisition. In addition, this study is also one that is specific or situated because of the contexts the children were in. This means that what these children have experienced may not be similar to what other Malaysian children or other L2 children may experience. This implies that other contextual factors found in the language environment such as the language being used, the opportunity to use the language and the amount of exposure to the language to be acquired also contribute to SLA. It is therefore recommended that research in the future should include the role of the context in which the language is acquired or learned.

Acknowledgements

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