

Revisiting English Language Learning among Malaysian Children

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Abstract

Despite learning English language for six years at elementary and five years at secondary levels, Malaysian students' English language competency has always been the obstacle in securing success at university level as well as in job opportunities. Hence, various interventions have been taken in the teaching and learning process as well as changes in language policy. This paper calls for a revisit on Malaysia's policy on teaching English at primary schools. It discusses the findings of English language acquisition as experienced by Azlan, Hazwan and Aida's (pseudonyms), aged six, and explored through an ethnographic case study. The children's, their mother's and teacher's voices were gathered through interviews. The children's behaviours in and outside of school and at home were also captured through observations. A grounded theory data analysis approach was employed in analysing the data. Findings illuminated that for these children, the second language was acquired through play and use; and that developing children's confidence should be the starting point. The implication of this finding is discussed in the light of the English language policy for teaching English to Malaysian primary school children.

Keywords: language learning, Malaysia, children, Malaysian language policy, Ethnography SLA

1. Introduction

Various studies have attempted to explain why Malaysian students have continuously been unable to achieve a reasonable competency level in English despite learning it for 11 years in schools (Naginder, 2006; Jalaludin, Awal & Bakar, 2008). Yet, their 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) (Tinggi, 2012). Employers reported that although the fresh graduates are highly qualified, they are not proficient in English (ibid 2012). Therefore, various measures have been undertaken such as the teaching and learning of Mathematics and Science subjects in English (ETeMs). The most current measure is employing 375 teachers of English as a first language to teach English in Malaysian schools. Meanwhile, a review of literature on studies carried out on language learning illuminated that what is written in the language teaching policy and curriculum cannot be implemented in schools because of the over-riding concern for examination Normazidah, Khoo & Hazita (2012). They concluded that there is a mismatch between policy and practice and that the policy as envisaged in the school curriculum cannot be fully implemented. Hence, these researchers recommended highly for educators and policy makers to re-examine how English language learning is theorized in Malaysia's context and carry out relevant interventions to ensure better English language learning among our learners. This concern is also reflected in one of the thrusts in the *Dasar Pembangunan Pendidikan (Education Development Policy) 2013-2015* that is to strengthen Malaysian students' English Language competency. There is a need to revisit the language teaching and learning policies and see how these are translated into the curriculum and carried out in the teaching and learning process. This paper therefore has two aims: first, to discuss the current policies of English Language teaching in Malaysia and second, to discuss the findings of a study on how three Malaysian children experienced second language acquisition (SLA). It is hoped that this ethnographic case study provides insights to what entails in language learning for young children in building the groundwork for further language learning teaching and learning as well as policy development.

2. Literature

2.1 Status and Role of English Language in Malaysia

What exactly is the status of English in Malaysia? Policy makers perceived it as a second language as stipulated in Malaysia's educational policies. This means that it functions as an official language; apart from the Malay language. It is a major language of law as well as an important language of education, government, business and the media. It is also a pre-requisite to enter the university or the language of instruction for certain courses at the university such as tourism, business and civil services (Richards, 1985). Meanwhile, it is most often perceived as a foreign language by many Malaysian students particularly in rural areas because it is not their mother tongue and is not frequently used by them in their everyday activities.

Historically, English language first set its status in Malaysia as the language of the colony prior to Malaysia's independence with the introduction of the Resident System in the 1870's and the educational facilities during the British colonization in the 1950's. In 1970's, the media further contributed to the extensive use of English as the medium of instruction at schools (Faisal, 2003). This created uneasiness among the nationalists which resulted in the language being abandoned and Bahasa Melayu became the main language of instruction in 1982. Despite such resentment, the government was also committed to maintain English as the second most important language to be used in international and economic relations; as stipulated in the New Economic Policy (1971-1990). Hence, as the government implements vigorously the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia, measures are also taken to ensure that English is also learnt and acquired by school students. This is indicated in the English language syllabus:

“In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling.” (KPM, 1995, p. 1)

English is seen as a tool to gain knowledge; particularly in the field of science and technology (Pillay, 1995). All these are to ensure that Malaysia is not left too far behind from the developed nations. The 1996 Education Act further reaffirmed the role of English. Most recent is the *Memertabatkan Bahasa Melayu Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI)* policy that aims to strengthen the English language so that this international language of communication could be mastered to enable Malaysians to explore various fields and compete globally. However, Nunan (2003) concluded from his survey on the impact of English as a global language on language policies among Asian countries that the deteriorating standards of English among Malaysians will hinder the aspiration that Malaysia be declared a developed nation by 2020. In addition, Mohd Sofi (2003) concluded in his study that language performance among primary school children has not improved tremendously despite having learnt the language for six years. Hence, there is a need to reflect on the actual role of English in Malaysia. Or perhaps, the government's aspirations may not have fully reached the ground level – the primary school level.

2.2 English Language Teaching (ELT) in Primary Schools

The aims of ELT in Primary Schools as stipulated in the Curriculum is to equip students with the basic English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and knowledge of grammar to enable them to communicate (orally and in writing) in and out of school for different purposes, and different situations (KPM, 1995). The syllabus further outlines that by the end of primary schools, students should be able to:

- i. listen to and understand simple spoken English in certain given contexts;
- ii. speak and respond clearly and appropriately in familiar situations using simple language;
- iii. read and understand different kinds of texts for enjoyment and information; and
- iv. write for different purposes and in different forms using simple language.

(ibid, 1995, p. 2)

These aims were later extended to meet the new orientation of technology. The curriculum now also aims for students to be able to:

- i. obtain information from a variety of sources, and use the information appropriately for various purposes;
- ii. give information in spoken and written forms;
- iii. listen to, read or view and respond to stimuli;
- iv. be involved in spoken or written personal expressions;

v. apply learning skills and take responsibility for their own learning.

(KPM, 1998)

To implement this, 240 and 210 minutes per week is allocated for learning English in Years 1 to 3 and Years 4 to 6, respectively. Students are taught aural-oral skills (listening and speaking) and literacy skills (reading and writing) in context through selected topics. The selected topics range from what is immediate or familiar to Malaysian students to topics that are unfamiliar to them; and reflective of an integrated cross-curriculum approach. Hence, teachers claim that students' literacy skills (reading and writing) seemed to improve as indicated by the Primary School Assessment (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah – UPSR*). Students are found to be able to read and understand passages, and write simple sentences that are isolated from one another; such as that in the examination format. However, they are not able to speak (Mohd Sofi, 2003); which is reflective of their listening skill. This is because of the over emphasis on examination results in the Malaysian education system (ibid 2003). The standardised examinations focus on accuracy in the literacy skills - reading and writing as reflected by the structured examination questions. Little attention is given to the listening and speaking skills, even at this level of education – the primary school level. As a result, these students proceed to secondary education and tertiary education being 'literate' in the reading and writing skills. The problem then arises when they seek for employment where they are expected to communicate in English, even during job interviews. It is no surprise when employers find most fresh graduates not suitable despite being excellent graduates. Hence, higher education institutions are expected to include generic skills in the education systems that include communicative skills.

The scenario in Malaysia's ELT as concluded by Mohd Sofi (2003) is that there is no connection between how English is supposed to be taught as stated in the curriculum, how it is actually taught in classrooms as well as how performance in the language is assessed. That is; the policy stresses on the significance of learning the language for everyday use while classroom practice focuses on the attainment of excellence in the examination. This is evident in the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) that focuses on communication; ie fluency while the examination is very structured; ie focused on accuracy. In other words, schools in reality are implementing a 'test-driven' curriculum, as teachers and schools are accountable through public examinations (Lim, 1997). Similarly, the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (ETeMs) aims to enhance students' English language proficiency. However, both subjects require a higher level of thinking which should be taught in a language that students are more proficient at; in this case the Malay Language. These situations indicate that perhaps there is a need to revisit the fundamental issue that is the basics – what constitutes in literacy and how it is conceptualized at the initial stage of language learning – in this case, the primary schools.

Literacy as expressed in ELT Malaysia's syllabus includes all language skills. However, the 'literacy' aspect given focus in practice seems to be on the reading and writing skills. This is because these skills are measured in the national examinations. According to the scholarships of research, literacy should be conceptualized as a social practice (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009) because language learning is related to various social factors as learners interact in human activities (Leki, 2007). This reflects Bakhtin and Vygotsky's view that language learning does not take place in isolation in the brains of individual learners; that it involves more than just mere decoding of the printed words to critical literacy (Purcell-Gates, 2007). Literacy involves "sprinkling information over students' heads and then testing them to see what they caught ... Teaching ... requires knowledge of students, knowledge of hopes, dreams, aspirations, skills, challenges, interests, preferences, intelligence, and values they bring with them to the classroom. It is an act of inquiry, investigation and research in the lives of the children." (Ayers, 1995: 6). In other words, language learning is a social act and understanding it requires an understanding how the process is experienced. This paper therefore reports and discusses the three Malaysian children's experiences acquiring and learning English.

3. The Study

The context of the study discussed in this paper was a mainstream school in the UK. Although the context is different than in Malaysia, that it is in the target language country, the role of English to these children is as a second language; as in Malaysia. This is because the children's stay in the UK was temporary; between three to four years; while their fathers were studying in the university. Also, the school environment was very reflective of a second or foreign language context where there were many ESL (English as a Second), EFL (English as a Foreign) or EAL (English as Another) language children. According to the school's population analysis taken in the 2004/2005 session (the time of data collection for the present study), there were 264 children enrolled at St. Peter's Church School. 60 (15%) were pupils whose mother tongue is not English. Some of these were local

children whose families have come from Vietnam, China, India, Pakistan or the Caribbean. There were also children whose parents were postgraduate students or lecturers at the university such as the children from Malaysia, Iran and Egypt (Dfes PLASC, 2005). The variety of student backgrounds indicates that the school had its own 'unique' learning context and the children were familiar with cultural and language differences.

Meanwhile, the composition of the pupils in the classroom discussed in this study was 22 pupils whose mother tongue is English and 11 EAL pupils. The EAL pupils were 3 Malaysians, 3 Indians, 4 Iraqis and 1 Japanese pupil. The study discussed was qualitative in nature and employed an ethnographic case study design as it enables knowledge to be obtained through encounters with the subjects through which their views and behaviours were continuously being interpreted to give meaningful explanations (Radnor, 2002). Three children aged six named Azlan, Hazwan and Aida (pseudonyms), their class teacher and their mothers were interviewed and tape recorded. The children were also observed at school and home. There were three phases of the data collection over a period of six months; involving 27 interviews (3 interviews with each adult participant and 4 interviews with each child, and 3 group interviews), 19 classroom and 12 home observations. Verbatim transcriptions were given to the adult participants for clarity of interview data. This was a means of member checking. Transcriptions of the children's interviews were also given to the parents as a means of validating the children's responses. All the transcriptions were then analysed according to the principles of grounded theory through constant comparative analysis to derive themes and categories.

4. Findings, Discussions and Implications

4.1 What Were Said

	Response	Theme
Azlan	<p>Related questions:</p> <p>1. How do you know how to play the game ... you read what is written ... <i>no... up there... there is no words... I just guess.</i></p> <p>2. So how do you know which is for which? ...<i>I watch tv</i></p> <p>3. When you don't understand, what do you do? ... <i>follow what they do...I ask my dad...</i></p>	<p>Strategy</p> <p>Resource – making association</p> <p>Strategy – assistance from peers & parent/adult</p>
Hazwan	<p>Related question:</p> <p>1. Can you understand everything your teacher says? ... <i>yeah but the tricky one I don't</i></p> <p>2. What do you do when you don't understand? ... <i>tell my friends...look at my friends... ask my mother... ask my father</i></p> <p>3. (Based on recordings of students' behaviour in the classroom) How did you know that sentence is for that picture? ... <i>I read... only some</i></p>	<p>Strategy – assistance from peers & parent/adult</p>
Aida	<p>Related questions:</p> <p>1. If you don't understand, do you put up your hands? ...<i>no... we just see</i></p> <p>2. Then what do you do? ... <i>see what teacher does first</i></p> <p>3. At school. When your teacher tells you something but you don't understand, what do you do? <i>Tell my teacher</i></p> <p>4. If your teacher is not there, do you ask your friends? <i>No... and then copy</i></p>	<p>Strategy - observe Teacher – role model</p> <p>Strategy – assistance from peers & parent/adult follow</p>

	Related question: From your observation, how did the children acquire English?	
The teacher	<i>They tend to <u>understand before they speak</u>... <u>picking up bits</u> but they haven't got the <u>confidence</u> to speak out or to put it into any sentence We <u>don't have a formal grammar</u> lesson but obviously they have to <u>pick up word order that would make sense</u> I think having a <u>good relationship with your children is important, help them get the confidence, as soon as you ca. If they're <u>happy within the environment, their learning would be easier</u></u> <u>Knowing a bit more of the background of the children</u> would help because if you know you can see why they make the error</i>	Developmental Acquire Confidence – affective No formal grammar - Communication – not content T-S relationship Conducive – non threatening learning environment Learner's background
Azlan's mother	<i>From school, they <u>pick up</u> very easily, even the pronunciation...the slang...they have <u>friends</u>... when he first entered nursery...he was quiet he just <u>listened</u>... from there he became <u>brave to ask</u>...; through <u>observation</u>...then only he started to practice...</i>	Acquire Peers Developmental exposure
Hazwan's mother	<i>From my observation, I notice he acquires it <u>informally</u>... without our realisation... he has not learnt it formally... only through our daily conversation...at <u>school he learns English</u>... then <u>tv</u> ... he watches cartoon... I think he <u>picks up</u> a lot at <u>school</u> and when he <u>talks to his friends</u> at school</i>	No formal grammar - Communication – not content Resources – school, tv Acquire Friends
Aida's mother	<i><u>I did teach her how to read in English</u>... some vocabularies... but she has learnt more here. <u>School environment</u> contributes a lot ... all her <u>friends are English</u> ... I mean her friends, <u>teachers</u>. Furthermore, the <u>medium of instruction is English</u> so that helped a lot</i>	Parent's help School environment – conducive Teachers Medium of instruction

The themes identified from the responses in the interviews with the children indicate that they had their own strategies in trying to understand the language they were exposed to. These included making *guesses*, looking or *following* their *friends*, *watching* their *teacher* as well as *asking* their *parents*, *teacher* or peers. None of the children talked about learning the language per se as they were merely going through their days at school and at home as children. In doing so, they were using the language because their friends were using the language, the books they read were written in English, the cartoons or television programmes they were watching were in English as well as the games they played on the Internet or Play-station were all in English. They had to use the language as that was the language at play; that in order for them to be a part of the community they were in; they had to use the language. This reflects the mothers' and teacher's responses that the children seemed to *pick up* the language; as there were *no formal grammar* language learning being taught in the classroom as explained by the teacher and at home as indicated by the mothers' responses. Also, the mothers and teachers' responses also indicated the developmental stages in language learning where developing the children's confidence need to be achieved first. This is followed by the speaking skill which would be acquired after listening to the language being used by others through observations of the communication with the teacher and their friends taking place in the class and at school. Writing skills and reading skills were not mentioned much either by the teacher or the mothers. Their responses indicated literacy as first being able to speak well which will take place after the

children have listened to (or rather observed in this case) the language being used. The findings also suggest that children have their own strategies to make sense of what they are experiencing; in this case experiencing second language acquisition (SLA). These imply the need for providing exposure to the language and opportunities to use the language.

4.2 What Were Observed

The study involved participatory and non-participatory observations at home and at school. At home, no formal teaching and learning of English were observed taking place. The main language of communication at home was the Malay language. Nevertheless, the children were talking to each other in English at school, at home when they were seen together as well as outside of their homes and school (observation during religious festival and when they were visiting other Malaysian homes). The exposure to English and opportunity to use the language was when they were watching television, surfing the Internet, playing games on the Playstation and reading their story books or doing their work. The exposure and opportunities to use English language were there but it was the children taking charge on whether or not they would want to use the language; as well as if the parents were also using the language. This was coded as the children's characteristics that had an impact on their use of the language. Azlan, was observed to be persistent in using the language when he repeatedly spoke in English despite being spoken to by his parents in the Malay language. Hazwan and Aida however were observed to use less English at home as their parents were also observed to use less English at home; unlike Azlan's parents. The literacy practices at Azlan's home was also very English-based with respect to more English books, more use of the language, and the television and computer were left accessible to Azlan (turned on all the time). The findings from the interviews with the mothers indicate that the parents' own background experience of acquiring and learning English and their cultural practices had an impact on the literacy practices at homes. This implies that the parents' own experiences with acquiring or learning English plays a role in creating the environment and opportunity where language learning can take place. Hence, these should be taken into consideration in designing and implementing programmes; as well as in developing policies on English language learning.

Meanwhile at school, it was observed that there were attempts to make the school and all its pupils receptive of other mother tongues by having names of rooms written in English and Arabic. This was because majority of the children were EAL with Arabic as their mother tongue. The school also employed a Pakistani lady to work as a dinner lady. The children with EAL were allowed to speak in their mother tongue at school. All these created an environment that was 'friendly' to the children with EAL. The environment also enabled children with English as their mother tongue to be familiar with different cultures and language. This situation reflects the first form of provision mentioned by Bourne (2001) who identified three potential forms of provision made by local authorities and schools for EAL learners. English was not taught as a formal language as it would be in Malaysia. English language was indirectly taught through literacy. It was observed that typically, the teacher started the class with a show and talk session where the children were asked to talk about something they brought from home. This was a big group session where all the children were sitting on the floor. This was followed by a reading aloud or story telling session. Children were encouraged and guided to give or express their thoughts. This would be carried out between 20 to 40 minutes and then the teacher would give clear and simple instructions on what they were supposed to do on their own. Then the children would work at their tables that were arranged for four to five children could sit face-to-face. Whenever any child finished his or her work, the child was allowed to go to the reading or computer corners in the classroom or the art and play area next to their class. The teacher was always there and in her pleasant ways facilitating the children in their learning. There was no difficult or uneasiness situations observed. Also, the children's work such as their art works, were put up in the class where the children were observed proudly showing and telling each other of their work. All these created a lively, enjoyable, conducive or 'unthreatened' environment that enabled the students to develop their confidence to use English. Similar to the findings of the home observation, the learning environment seem to have an impact on the children's learning as they feel confident to use the language and had exposure and opportunities to use the language.

5. Conclusion

The discussions on the findings and the implications described above may be reflected to the language policy as well as ELT in Malaysia. These imply the need to revisit the English language teaching and learning process at primary school. As language learning is developmental, so is the teaching and learning process. Changes or interventions should be made from the basics – ELT at primary schools. It implies that developing children's confidence to use English needs to be developed first; along with their listening and speaking skills. Exposure to the language and opportunities to use the language should be increased. Conducive English language environment should be created. The use of the language should be increased as language is a tool, a skill to be

acquired for communication, not a subject to be mastered or a set of rules to be memorized.

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