

Developing Identity In Diversity: A Second Language Acquisition Experience

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Abstract

This paper discusses how three young Malaysian children aged six developed an identity while experiencing second language acquisition (SLA). It illustrates how language difference which is an aspect of diversity has lead learners to develop an identity as language learners. The discussion is based on the findings of an ethnographic case study on three young Malaysian children's SLA experiences in the United Kingdom (U.K). The aim of this study is to gather insights from these children about their SLA experiences while attending a mainstream school and living in the U.K. This is to enhance our understanding about the process. The children were interviewed as individuals and as a group; and were observed at school and home. Transcripts of the interviews and observations were examined closely to identify themes for analysis and discussion. The findings indicate that the children experienced SLA as a socialization process in which the target language was being used to get on with life in a mainstream classroom and at home. The findings indicated several factors that might have an impact on the children's SLA. One that had a significant impact was that the children, without their awareness, were developing an identity in dealing with diversity.

Keywords: second language acquisition, experience, diversity, identity, ethnographic case study.

Introduction

In this global world, teachers meet many children from other countries who are learning English either as a second, foreign or additional language as a result of economic migration. For instance, in Devon, United Kingdom (where the present study was conducted), 317(0.33%) of the whole school children population were Asian children. 36(0.04%) of them were Malaysian children with 32 in primary and 4 children in secondary schools (Dfes PLASC, 2005). Although this was a small figure, it was still a significant one because these children represented one of the ethnic minority groups in mainstream schools. As a minority group, they were diverse in terms of their culture as well as language background. In addition, these children were also trying to cope in a different school environment which may affect their socio-emotional conditions. In other words, apart from learning new subjects, they had to acquire English language as the language of instruction; not only for learning purposes but also for communicating and interacting with their peers and teachers. Both tasks were not easy because when the children entered their classroom, apart from their cognitive ability, they also brought

along their own language or mother tongue, learning styles, attitude and many other social cultural variables that had an impact on their learning process in general and language acquisition process specifically.

This study therefore aimed to explore these children's second language acquisition experiences while attending mainstream schools in Devon, U.K where they were exposed to the use of the target language (English) as the medium of instruction. Three research questions underpinned the whole study. This paper however, presents the findings and discussion of the first research question: How do young Malaysian children experience SLA in the U.K? This paper first presents a brief literature on SLA and identity development in SLA. This is followed by a description of the study, findings and implications that underpin the discussions in this paper.

Second Language Acquisition

A general overview of related literature on SLA indicates that there has been increasing discussion about the nature of what the field of SLA actually studies. These include ontological and epistemological issues and how researchers might best go about studying it (eg. Beretta, 1991; Crookes, 1992; the special issue of *Applied Linguistics* entitled 'Theory Construction in Language Acquisition' 1993; van Lier, 1994; Block, 1996a; Lantolf, 1996; Gregg et al., 1997; Gass, 1998; Long, 1998; Gregg, 2000 cited in Atkinson, 2002). This is because theories and research in SLA have developed from cognitively oriented perspective and extended to an essentially social orientation. One sees SLA as an individualistic, mental process; functioning independently of the context and use of the language; while the other sees SLA as a process in which the second language is acquired through interaction and used resourcefully, contingently and contextually (Firth & Wagner, 1997). Thus, the former looks at variables related to learner's cognitive ability while the later looks at various social factors that may have an impact on the process of acquiring a second language.

Current views consider the fundamental concern of SLA to be the study of social action. In general, studies that foreground a social understanding focus on social and cultural influences on SLA because the process of interaction is very much influenced by cultural elements. This is because in going about our everyday business, we give and take orders, request help, commiserate, chat with friends, deliberate, negotiate, gossip, and seek advice, and so on. We participate in such routine activities with ease and can easily distinguish one activity from another. Hence, according to the socio-cognitive approach to SLA, children acquire language through action and participation (Pennycook 1994) or interaction with more capable social members such as teachers, peers, family members and mentors (Atkinson, 2002). Socio-cognitive approach also argues for the profound interdependency and integration of both the cognitive and socio aspects of language and its acquisition (Atkinson, 2002). In other words, SLA is 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 act in its social world; while the what, when, why and how to act with the linguistic knowledge is determined by the child's knowledge or competence of the socio aspects of language.

Identity Development in Second Language Acquisition

One social factor in SLA is contributed by the children themselves. It is the role they play as the agent of their learning process. What this means is that learners play a role in determining what, when or how they learn a language. In other words, learners are the agents of their own learning who decide on how they are going to react, how much time and effort to be invested or which choice of actions to be taken. In these discussions, agency is often closely linked to discussions of identity construction. Agency is seen to emerge from this process of interactive and reflective positioning (Harre & Van Lagenhove, 1999). More recent studies have focused on agency as a situated negotiated and dynamic response to learning; that is a negotiated outcome of how learners perceive themselves to be at a given point in time and who others see them as (Toohey, 2000; Day 2002). A number of studies have sought to show how children's identity construction process will impact on the effort they put in to the language acquisition process and also the actions they take to ensure that they are being accepted as competent members in their community of practice (eg. Hall, 1990, 1996; Holland, 1998 cited in Day, 2002). These show that learners determine their own learning.

In relation to SLA among young children, Pagett (2006) approached it as a sociocultural identity. Her study showed that English as an Additional Language (EAL) children felt the need to be recognised as competent members in their classroom and outside of the classroom. The study illuminated that the six Bengali children in the study decided to use their mother tongue at home and English in their primary school because they wanted to be "like everyone else". This study also discussed the children's acculturation process into the target language; whether their L1 was maintained or replaced by the target language. The study indicated that although the children were not forced to speak in English, but because they wanted to be accepted by the community they were in, their peers in particular, the children decided to immediately acquire English and assimilate themselves with the language and perhaps the culture.

Similarly, Toohey's (2000) ethnographic study focussed on the classroom as the community of practice. The study involved six young ESL learners over a three year period. The study emphasized on the children's development of identity and patterns of participation. The study found that the Polish child was more successful than the Punjabi child in identifying themselves as participants of the community they were in, that is their classroom. This identification of self within the community was seen to impact on the extent to which they gained more conversational and language acquisition opportunities and access to resources.

Identity has been viewed as being fixed and pre-existent on the one hand, and dynamically constructed during interactions on the other (Graham, 2007). It determines the amount of effort put into the SLA process. Lee Su Kim's doctoral study on the impact of English on the identities of a group of selected Malaysian postgraduate students who were very fluent speakers of English found that there was resentment in certain localized contexts amongst the Malays towards English. Using English was perceived as an attempt to "show off", being "boastful", a relic of colonialism, as being

elitist, and a betrayal of the Malay cultural identity and the Malay language. This resentment was also prevalent amongst the non-Malay students (Lee Su Kim, 2006; Lee Su Kim et al., 2007). The Chinese participants reported that they were regarded as “too Westernized” because they could only speak in English and were not fluent in Mandarin. A similar study on multilingual undergraduates also provided evidence on the impact of English language on the development of identity (Lee Su Kim et al., 2010). In this study, the identification of self was also discussed and illuminated.

The Study

Three children, Azlan, Hazwan and Aida (pseudonyms) aged 6 were involved in this study. They were Year 1 children at St. Peter’s Primary School (pseudonym); a mainstream school. The children’s classroom was diversified in its students’ composition where there were three Malaysians, a Japanese, two Iranians, one Indian and the others were children with English as their first language. These Malaysian children were selected as the cases in this study for several reasons. First, the children were in the same classroom at the same school. This eliminated any variables in relation to different teaching approach or learning context in terms of the school environment. Second, they were from similar ethnic background (Malaysian Malay – the major ethnic group in Malaysia). This was to overcome variables due to different ethnic background. Finally, as gender was not a variable studied, two of the children were boys and one was a girl. Both boys came to the U.K at age two and attended a year at the Reception class in the same school. Meanwhile, Aida came at the age of three, and had attended half a term of reception at the same school. In other words, prior to this study, the boys had been in the U.K for about three years while the girl had been in the U.K for about two years. Apart from the children, their parents and class teacher were also interviewed as a means of triangulation; to gather insights from their perspectives apart from to cross-check the children’s responses in the interviews.

As the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of young Malaysian children acquiring a second language; the study was qualitative in nature under the interpretive paradigm. From a qualitative perspective, reality is subjective and open to individual interpretation. 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. In this approach, 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. As, the researcher was also a member of the community in which the participants were in and had access to the school the participants were attending as well as their homes, an ethnographic case study methodology was employed.

The techniques of data collection in this study were interviews and observations. The interviews were conducted with Azlan, Hazwan and Aida, their parents and their class teacher. The children were interviewed individually and as a group. Interviews were tape-recorded. The observations included classroom and home observations. Several classroom observations were also video-taped and used to stimulate discussion in several

interviews with the children. All adult participants had given a written consent and their identities were kept anonymous. Parents' consent included their children's participation in the study. There were three phases of the data collection in a six months time frame. A total of 27 interviews (3 interviews with each adult participant and 4 interviews with each child, and 3 group interviews), 19 classroom observations and 12 home observations were carried out. Copies of the transcriptions were given to the adult participants for correction or addition of information. This was to ensure clarification of what the participants had said during the interviews and to show the interpretations I had made in deriving the themes which represented the concept or idea that the parents conveyed. Transcriptions of the children's interviews were also given to the parents as a means of validating the children's responses because the children would not be able to remember what they said. The children's responses or answers would indicate the children's perception which the parents would expect of their children. All the transcriptions were analysed according to the principles of grounded theory through constant comparative analysis to derive themes and categories. One of the themes illuminated that was not anticipated prior to the data collection was identity.

Findings and Discussions

The children's Second Language Acquisition experiences

At school, Azlan, Hazwan and Aida were observed experiencing learning just like other children. They did the same routines, received the same instructions or teachings and participated in all activities along with other L1 children. There was no formal teaching of the English language except for Literacy which was an hour a day where children read and did activities related to language aspects. At this Key Stage 1, the children were expected to learn to speak confidently and listen to what others are saying, be able to read and write independently and with enthusiasm, and use language to explore their own experiences and imaginary worlds (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004). This means that the children were not taught about the language per se; instead they learned how to use the language. It was expected that the children's linguistic knowledge will eventually be developed through using the language in participating in their day by day activities in the classroom. This implies that exposure and opportunity to use the language should be abundant to ensure that the children receive abundant language input and are able to use the language. In the context of this study, when the children are able to use English confidently, they will feel at ease with the language just as they feel comfortable with their mother tongue. They may also identify English as the language next to their Malay language. This confidence develops their self identity; as one who is able to speak both Malay and English language. The children may also identify themselves as a Malay or an English person.

Thus, the children were observed using English most when they were interacting with their friends (both English as a first language (L1) and English as a second or another language (L2) children) during activities such as role-play and group work in the classroom and in their activity room. Meanwhile, the children were observed to be very quiet and seemed passive during classroom teaching. For instance, they did not put up

their hands as frequently as the other L1 children to volunteer answers to questions or to express their thoughts. However, they would respond when questions were specifically directed to them. According to the teacher *'the children seem to observe more...they listen to instructions and they understand...know what is going on...they hear instructions and these are repeated'* (Interview teacher – 21/9/04). When discussed further in the interview, and as shown in the subsequent data, this behaviour was related to culture. The teacher believed that from her understanding, arguing or voicing out opinions is not a norm in the Asian culture. Thus, she observed Asian children to be very quiet and obedient. This illustrates how culture may have an impact on the development of children's identity.

When asked who did they learn English from and what they would do if they did not understand in the classroom, they responded that they *'follow friends, look at people'* (Azlan), *'look at my friends, ask friends'* (Hazwan) and *'hear people talk and copy'* (Aida). This indicates that the children observed or asked their friends to help them understand what they were expected to do. These showed that the children felt comfortable with their friends. The children also said that they liked going to school because *'there are nice things'* (Azlan), *'like playing Lego, like to study at school'* (Hazwan) and *'like do work'* (Aida). This indicates that the children liked going to school because it was a place where they could 'play' or socialize. In addition, according to the children, they enjoyed all the activities in the classroom. There were different kinds of activities that the children could do in the classroom. After each structured lesson, the children were allowed to do activities related to the lesson in groups. For instance, there was an activity corner where the children could have simulation games, role-plays or merely interact with their friends in a fun way. They also liked going to the library to look for books to read. They also liked doing work in the computer room where they could print their work that would later be presented to the class. In fact, after each activity, the children had the opportunity to present their work to the whole class. Some were then put on the soft-boards around the class. This was a means that increased the children's confidence; making them feel that their work was appreciated and they could see their work as well as giving them a sense of belonging. The teacher also treated these children just like the other L1 children. She was observed to be clear in her articulations and in giving instructions. She gave the children time to respond, involved the children in all discussions and activities, used a lot of pointing and illustrations, rephrased her sentences when the children appeared not to understand, used stories in her lessons, asked children to relate their experience with the lesson, and many other ways that encouraged the children to participate. This perhaps had an impact on Azlan, Hazwan and Aida's SLA experiences; where they could have felt accepted, comfortable and confident in the classroom. This also reflected the teacher's belief that *"when the children are confident, they will learn better"* (Interview teacher – 21/9/04). From these data, the theme that emerged was that the school environment which included the teacher and other students played a significant role in the children's life at school. The children felt being a part of the classroom community that helped shape their sense of identity.

Meanwhile, at the children's homes, it was observed that there was no formal or structured teaching of English or additional work given by the parents to help the

children with their SLA. The parents allowed their children to be involved in whatever daily activities the children were interested in; such as watching television, playing games on the computer or Play-station, surfing the Internet, drawing, or just playing with their siblings. It should be noted that the language of the television programmes or games on the computer or Play-station was English. Although there are websites in Malay, their L1, the children were observed surfing the English website. It was inevitable that the language of the resources available to the children was English because they were living in the U.K. However, the language practice at home was dependent on the parents and the children themselves. For instance, Azlan's parents spoke more English in comparison to the other two children's parents. This is a reflection of the parents' own SLA experience, L2 ability and attitude towards English. The children also had the choice of language used at home where Azlan for instance decided to use more English at home in comparison to Hazwan and Aida.

To summarize, the answer to the question 'How do young Malaysian children experience SLA' is naturally, The children acquired the language as they were getting on with their lives in their social context; through their interactions with the people and their environment; similar to Krashen's claim 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' (Schotz, 2002). In the context of this study, the children did not talk about SLA as learning about a language or acquiring the rules or structure of the language because they did not experience SLA as a formal language learning process. Perhaps also because they were not capable of talking about SLA as they were young and perceive it as a way to survive in their world as children in an English speaking environment. This is evident as they talked about doing things and interacting in the second language. Hence, this study illuminated the social aspects of SLA and that language acquisition is a naturalistic and situated process; as what the parents said "*the children pick up English faster than we realize*" (Parent interviews). This indicates that SLA occurs even without a special L2 programme; that language acquisition may be enhanced by providing a context where the children are able to get as much opportunities as possible to receive and use the language and they will acquire the language.

Child characteristics and home environment in developing identity

An interesting finding of this study was how the children's experiences and the nature of their individual characteristics developed their identity. This study indicates that a child's background and characteristics as a learner have an impact on their SL process. Although the children were in the same classroom and received similar instructions from the same teacher; they differed in their SLA experiences; thus developing different identities. For instance, Aida was observed spending most of her time drawing and colouring on her own. Minimum English was used at her home and with friends at school. She was quiet in comparison to the other two children. However, Aida had more opportunities to interact with L1 children in her classroom because she did not have another Malaysian girl to do things together. She was also less attentive in the classroom (as observed during classroom observation and admitted by the teacher in her interview). She was

either talking to her friends or playing with her fingers and hair or just looking through the teacher. Aida, in general was not playing a significant role as a language user and consequently language learner.

Azlan and Hazwan appeared to be independent in their learning. Azlan seemed outspoken and liked to explore more with the language in comparison to Hazwan. He was observed using a lot of English at school with his friends. At home, he spoke English with his parents, even when his parents spoke in Malay; indicating his persistence character. He wrote in his book about things he did earlier at school, watched the television, played the Play-station and used the computer. He was frequently observed accessing the English Internet. He was always asking his parents how to say things and how to spell words (as reported in interview with parents and as observed during home observations). Azlan showed a very strong agentive role where he determined the language he wanted to use.

Hazwan on the other hand spent most of his time at home watching the television and playing with his younger brothers. He was not observed using a lot of English at home. This may be as he reported that '*no English at home*' and admitted by his mother upon her husband's remark '*kita orang Kelantan*'. This indicates that because they are *Kelantanis*, there was no need to use English at home. Therefore, Hazwan appeared to be a less frequent user of English in comparison to Azlan. This is similar to Lee Su Kim's doctoral study finding on the impact of English on the identities of a group of selected Malaysian postgraduate students who were very fluent speakers of English (2001; 2003; 2005; 2006). The studies found that there was resentment in certain localized contexts amongst the Malays towards English; which reflect the identity an individual would want to adopt. Perhaps in Hazwan's case, he may not be aware of his self identity but having to follow the norm or the literary practices in his home where no English was allowed, he could not play an active role in his language acquisition process.

These findings show how the children's characteristics and home environment such as Azlan, an inquisitive and persistent character; Aida, the quiet and less attentive character in the class; and Hazwan, whose home literacy practices limited the use of English due to cultural beliefs and practices had an impact on the children's use of the language as well as the agentive role they would play in their SLA process which eventually affect their language learning.

Conclusion and Implication

This study has given insights to the understanding of how these young Malaysian children experienced the process of SLA. This study indicates that for these young Malaysian children, L2 is acquired naturally, through their interaction with their surroundings. The language input would be what is received from their teachers, friends, parents, siblings, other adults and other sources around them such as the computer and television; which would form the child's knowledge of the structure of L2. It is through interaction with its surroundings while participating in a variety of activities that the

child gets to try out his knowledge of the language and later improve or refine his or her output of the language.

The implication is that because L2 is acquired through interactions as the children get on with their lives; it is important to provide an environment where opportunities to receive and use L2 is abundant. Another implication concerns the teaching approach employed by language teachers. L2 is not acquired through tedious drills or exercises that require cognitive competence. It could be easily acquired if children use the language at ease in their interactions with people around them, particularly their friends. This could be achieved by providing as much as possible opportunities for the children to use the language, for instance group work and role-play. This will build up children's confidence to use the language.

Due to the nature of an ethnographic case study, this study has given an understanding of how identity can be a dynamic, changing and very much contextual based. Although it was based on a specific group that is young Malaysian children, the findings may have a wider application to other young children of different background or ethnic group. This study therefore recommends that similar research be conducted on children of different cultures. In addition, this study was also conducted in the country of the target language. Perhaps a similar study could be conducted in the participants' own country. In other words, a different learning context and this will shed more knowledge to our understanding of SLA.

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