Managing Linguistic Diversity through Informal and Non Formal Education

Hamidah Yamat*

*Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper discusses managing linguistic diversity through an informal and non formal education. Findings of interviews and observations, analysed through grounded theory process were gathered from interviews and observations of three young Malaysian children attending a mainstream school in the United Kingdom. Data were triangulated with interviews with the children’s mothers and class teacher. The children talked about their experiences using the language and observed ‘getting the language’ while playing and interacting with their friends and adults inside and outside of school and television, Play Station and computer. This implies linguistic diversity can be managed through informal and non formal.

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1. Introduction

Diversity in a classroom presents itself in various ways. No two students are alike in terms of their strengths and needs. This increasing diversity is creating challenges for teachers seeking to meet the multifaceted needs of their students. What more in today’s global world where teachers meet many children from other countries as a result of economic migration who are learning English either as a second, foreign or additional language. For instance, in the UK, the 2001 Census on school population has shown that one in eight pupils come from a minority ethnic background and by 2010 the proportion was expected to be around one in five. In 2004, 17% of the maintained school population in England was classified as belonging to a minority ethnic group (Education and Skills, 2005). These ethnic minority children have to acquire English language not only as the language of instruction for learning purposes but also for social reasons; for communicating and interacting with peers, other adults as well as the media that they would have to interact with inside and outside of school. This poses challenges to today’s teachers because...
students bring with them into the classroom not only their experiences but also their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Are teachers prepared to meet the challenges of working with diverse students? How should the students be taught? Prior to that and more importantly is how should the students’ linguistic diversity be managed? Thus, this study aims to explore young children’s experiences acquiring a second language and perhaps recommend means of managing linguistic diversity.

2. Linguistic Diversity

Several aspects need to be considered when discussing about linguistic diversity. First, each language will have its own words for the same concept; as when English ‘dog’ shows up as in Spanish as perro or in Japanese as inu and in Malay as ‘anjing’. Second, the cultural connotation that the words bring along as in this case, ‘anjing’ for the Malay culture would spark a slight tension as it is seen as an animal that is not treated as a pet in the Muslim beliefs. Third, each language differs in its writing and sound systems. For instance there is no /th/ clusters in the Malay language and therefore there is no word with a /th/ spelling as well as in the sound system of the Malay language. Finally and perhaps most important is the grammar system. For instance, changes made onto the verbs in English to indicate the tenses (eg. walk + ed = walked) while in the Malay language, words are added (berjalan kaki + telah = telah berjalan kaki). These differences have an impact on students’ learning. Thus, to approach teaching a second language or to understand the process as similar to a first language may be almost unrealistic. The language development of English as a second language (ESL) children is distinctly different from the language development of children raised in a home where English is the only language being spoken (Wood, 2002).

Thus, linguistic diversity has an impact on the teaching and learning process. This is closely related to the distinction often drawn in the literature on second language learning that is between learning and acquisition. Krashen (1982), drawing upon a cognitivist view of learning, notably a Chomskyian view of language development, invoked the term acquisition to describe language learning as a subconscious informal mental process; and reserved the term learning to describe a formal conscious attention to language such as in situations where explicit instruction is provided, as in a school setting. However, this distinction has been increasingly contested over the last two decades. For example Mitchell and Myles (2004: 45) take issue on the view that conscious and subconscious learning are to be correlated with formal and informal learning settings. They argue that a subconscious process can occur in the language classroom as well as the conscious process in a naturalistic setting. In other words that learning can take place in a formal, planned and systematic manner such as in a classroom as well as in an informal and unstructured form such as when a new language is ‘picked up’ in the community or through structured activities outside of the classroom contexts.

This resonates with many Malaysian students’ experiences of second language learning where they were engaged with the language through meaningful interactions with friends (both English and non-English speaking friends such as many Chinese and Indians who speak more English than their mother tongue) and family members and with their teachers in the formal classroom context. The first context might be seen as an informal context and the process students went through as subconscious. Meanwhile, the second context, a more formal context and inside the classroom is a conscious process (learning). Though in reality, it was more complex than that as the interactions with friends occurred both in and outside of the classroom and that learning can occur outside the classroom as well. Nevertheless, regardless of which learning context, providing plenty of exposure and comprehensible input would definitely contribute to students’ acquiring or learning a second language.

3. Formal, Informal and Non Formal Education

A clear distinction is often made between formal and non-formal within the educational policy debates (Smith, 2008). Broadly speaking, formal education refers to the structured educational system provided by the state for children. In most countries including Malaysia, the formal education system is state supported and state-operated. Meanwhile, non-formal education refers to education which takes place outside of the formally organized schools or recognized educational institutions (Tight, 1996). Non-formal learning, by definition, stands outside schools, colleges, training centres and universities. It is not usually seen as ‘real’ learning, and nor do its outcomes have much currency value on the labour market. Non-formal learning is therefore typically undervalued. Meanwhile, informal learning is likely to be missed out of the picture altogether, although it is the oldest form of learning and
remains the mainstay of early childhood learning. Unlike formal and non-formal learning, informal learning is a natural accompaniment to everyday life (Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, European Commission, Unit E-3, http://www.irlgov.ie/educ/new/LifeLongLearning.htm.htm). It takes place in day-to-day life activities, related to work, family or leisure and may be intentional or non-intentional (Erout 2000 cited in Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2002).

Until now, formal learning has dominated policy thinking, shaping the ways in which education and training are provided and colouring people’s understandings of what counts as learning. However, the idea of non-formal education is a result of the realization that the existing formal educational curricula does not provide the skills needed in different jobs. This is because economic growth is much faster than educational growth. In addition, there is also the realization that jobs do not emerge directly as a result of educational inputs. In other words, economic growth causes people to compete with each other. In addition, the acceleration of scientific and technological progress in this globalised and knowledge-based world results in the knowledge and skills acquired during primary, secondary and university education not being sufficient for a professional career in today’s world. Thus, apart from the knowledge gained through formal education, there is also a need for knowledge gained through learning and training outside of the educational institutions. This also implies that education is not mainly about learning a particular content or subject matter. It means that all students must acknowledge the importance of education and sustainability in terms of education for lifelong learning. The continuum of lifelong learning brings non-formal and informal learning more fully into the picture. Thus, informal and non formal education should also be given equal attention in managing linguistic diversity in today’s classroom. They should not be put aside but rather be seen as complementary to formal education. The following discussion on the findings of a study on young Malaysian children’s second language acquisition experiences is hoped to illuminate how linguistic diversity may be managed.

4. The Study

Three six year old Malaysian children were the main cases of this study. They were attending a mainstream school in the UK. Therefore, they were experiencing acquiring and learning English as a second language for them because they would return to Malaysia after three to four years of stay in the UK. Thus, these children were considered as an ethnic minority group with a linguistic diversity. These children selected as the cases in this study for several reasons. First, the children were attending the same classroom of a mainstream school in the UK. 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: Azlan and Hazwan; and one was a girl Aida (pseudonyms). All three children came to the UK at the age of two to three years old. However, at the time of the data collection, Azlan and Hazwan had been in the UK for two years while Aida had been there for only one year. Both boys had 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. Meanwhile the adult participants in this study were the children’s class teacher who also taught them literacy; and the childrens’ mothers. All three mothers were working in Malaysia, prior to their stay in the UK.

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. The amount of data to be 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. I used the Microsoft Windows word processor to transcribe all the interviews and observations. 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 cross check the interpretations made in deriving the themes. Transcriptions of children’s interviews were also given to the parents. All the transcriptions were then analysed through constant comparative analysis to derive themes and categories under the grounded theory’s principles.
5. Findings and Discussion

Language acquisition and learning

When asked about how they learn English, the children said ‘voice, games, puzzle, computer’ (Azlan), ‘writing, computer, tv’ (Hazwan) and ‘activity, play, computer’ (Aida). Neither of them responded ‘teacher or in English class’. This may be interpreted that because the children did not have specific lessons on English language such as a lesson on grammar, tenses or pronunciation, they perceived that they had acquired the language from other sources such as computer, television and through playing. This indicates that for these children, SLA was not about learning L2 per se but about using the language to get on with their lives at school and home in a country where the common language was English. The children were neither concerned nor aware that they were acquiring a second language. They were only aware that they were communicating and interacting in English because that was the common language in their context. This also implies that the approach to teaching a second language should not be formal in nature alone. There should be activities involving media that are used in students’ everyday lives. In other words, the language will be acquired or learnt through language use.

When asked who did they learn English from, the children responded ‘friend’ (Azlan), ‘computer’ (Hazwan) and ‘family’ (Aida). All three children said that their friends helped them in their SLA because when they did not understand anything, they would ask (Hazwan) their friends or follow (Azlan) what their friends were doing. Azlan, Hazwan and Aida were also observed speaking in English all the time, even to each other. Interviews with the children and observations indicate that the children could have acquired the language through use in their play and interactions. This was apparent during the classroom observations where the children were using L2 in their interactions with their friends during activities and during play time. Although their language was just short phrases, there was communication and interaction taking place. In this case, language accuracy is not the focus for these children. This implies that at the beginning of a language learning programme, students should not be penalized for language inaccuracy. Their confidence should be developed first.

When asked whether they liked learning at the school, all the children answered ‘yes because they have friends and there are a lot of activities to do’. The observations also revealed that the children moved about in the classroom and interacted with their friends and teacher with ease. This could be because they felt comfortable in the class. This is important because the children would only feel at ease to use L2 when they felt confident, as admitted by the class teacher (Interview teacher – 21/9/04). Perhaps, the teacher’s approach had an impact on the children’s SLA experiences; where the teacher was observed to be clear in her instructions, fair in her attention and in giving equal opportunities to all children. Most of all, the teacher was observed praising the children all the time, regardless of whether the response given was right or wrong. Thus, it was not a surprise when all three children said that they liked their class teacher and that they were not ‘scared’ in the classroom.

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, in my opinion was a means that could increase children’s confidence; making them feel that their work was appreciated and they could see their work.

The classroom and home observations and findings of the interviews indicate that the young Malaysian children acquired L2 in a natural way, through their interactions with the people around them and their contexts. There may be instances where the cognitive aspect of L2 acquisition is significant. For instance, when asked ‘how do you know children like apples and oranges?’, Hazwan gave the answer ‘apple and oranges because they got same number’. The answer given was literally correct but he was expected to answer ‘because they have the most number’; to show that the child understood the concept of ‘more’. This implies the role of cognitive ability in SLA. However, this is so only if the objective of SLA is accuracy of production. If the aim is for communicative purposes, the answer given is perfectly understood. This could set the balance between cognitive and social aspects in SLA. In other words, if the purpose of acquiring a second language is for accuracy, then the cognitive aspect plays a slightly more significant role. Similarly, if the purpose is for interaction in the social world, then being able to convey the message plays a slightly more significant role. This explains why the young Malaysian children were not concerned about accuracy.
They were heard using English at whatever level that they had in their interactions with their friends, teachers, parents and others around them. Teachers and parents therefore should not expect children to be accurate when they produce a word, phrase or sentence in L2. However, adults should use L2 as accurately as possible in their interactions with young children because the quality and quantity of children’s language development is affected by the language that they are exposed to (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). By doing so, the children are exposed to the correct structure and pronunciation, which they will listen to or observe and internalize and finally use them on their own.

In short, 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). The children did not talk about SLA as learning about a language or acquiring the rules or structure of the language. Instead they talked about doing things and interacting in the second language. Hence, this study has 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.

Justifying informal and non formal learning

At school, Azlan, Hazwan and Aida experienced 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. The classroom observations showed that the children used English most when they were interacting with their friends (both native and other non-native children) during activities such as role-play and group work in the classroom and in their activity room. 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).

Meanwhile, when the children were asked 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) (refer table). This indicates that the children observed or asked their friends to help them understand what they were expected to do. This supports Atkinson’s (2002) claim that although interaction might not include conversations in all cases, it would certainly entail deep, holistic investment of learners in learning activities, and would see those learners as active agents, not passive recipients. This implies that in acquiring L2, a child may seem passive but the child is in fact observing, learning and acquiring and internalising what is observed and heard.

Azlan, Hazwan and Aida 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). The children also described the activities that they did at school. This indicates that the children liked going to school because it was a place where they could ‘play’ or socialize. The children were observed doing work and playing with other children in the class as well as other children at the school, as observed during playtimes; reflecting a non-threatening environment in the classroom and the school as a whole. 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 Ai’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).
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 is inevitable that the language of the resources available to the children is English because they are living in the UK. 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. Meanwhile, the children too 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.

6. Conclusion and Implication

This study has given insights to the understanding of how young Malaysian children experience the process of SLA in the UK where they had different linguistic background. Nevertheless, 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. This implies that language can also be learned through informal or non formal activities where students can learn the language through trial and error as well as observing and listening to the language being used and eventually ‘get the language’.

Another 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. This can also be done through non formal activities such as field trips or excursions to attend a speech or debate competition or to the local television station. Language camps over the weekends could also be carried out in which students use the language through activities and games conducted in the language camp.

This study also illuminates aspects of English language skills that students need to acquire. The findings indicate that the children were speaking in English in all their interactions. With this skill, they were able to communicate with their friends, exchange and share thoughts, thus acquiring the language through these activities. The children were allowed to do the activities that they liked; they were involved in all the activities in the classroom; they had role-plays, reading aloud and discussions as a group. These were among the activities in which the children had to use the language. This implies that the first skill to be acquired would be the speaking skill. To acquire this skill, students need to be involved in activities where they use the language.

The second skill is reading. Relating this to the process of lifelong learning, when students are able to speak English, they will be able to exchange thoughts and ideas with other speakers of the language in their respective fields of interest or work field. This will then lead them to read in the language being used in their communication because they will need to know something new or more to be able to communicate with the people within or outside of their field. Reading habit should be instilled in our students in order for them to get the knowledge the available printed resources. In addition, another skill that needs to be acquired is writing skill. This is because knowledge and information are also communicated in written forms. It is also in-line with what employers seek for.

In addition, if English language is acquired through interactions, the pedagogical approach to teaching English should not focus on formal learning where memorization of vocabulary items, grammar or structure is stressed. Instead, children should be exposed to the language and given as much opportunity to use the language so that their confidence to use the language could be built. This will then help them build their competence in English language and this can be done through informal or non formal education. Thus, linguistic diversity is managed.
7. Reference


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