# Children Acquiring A Second Language: Some Insights Gained From Talking To Six Urban Pre-School Malaysian Children

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I. The Malaysian urban environment is rich in its cultural and linguistic diversity The average urban pre-school child in Malaysia is exposed to three main local languages, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil with English featuring strongly as a second language. Besides these languages, there are a variety of Chinese dialects and a few other Indian languages. The result of such diversity is that most pre-school urban children are already able to handle a second language besides their mother tongue before they begin formal language lessons at school.

The linguistic background of six pre-school children around the Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur area throws some light on the second language situation in urban Malaysia. The six children were interviewed as part of a dissertation study (Ambrose, A. 1978). Two of the children spoke English first and picked up a local language, Tamil, in one case and a Chinese dialect, Cantonese, in the other, at a later stage. For these two children English could be considered the first language o
cond. Two other children were exposed to English in their homes but Cantonese and Hokkien became their medium of expression, as more of the local language was heard and spoken at home. However, attending kindergartens where English was the medium of play and activity had made them confident of using the English Language. Thus it had become a very strong second language. The fifth subject's language was Bahasa Malaysia and she had only just picked up English. English hardly featured in her home. The sixth subject can be described as a bilingual from an early age since his exposure had been somewhat equal as the parents communicated sometimes in English and sometimes in Bahasa Malaysia (hereafter B.M.).

The different ways in which English has featured in the lives of these urban Malaysian children throw some light on several factors or situations which exist in urban Malaysia. Firstly, there are some families especially in big towns like Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, Ipoh and Johor Baru where English is the first language of the home. In these families, the children are exposed to the local language or dialect like Cantonese, Hokkien or Tamil later by grandparents or maids who are usually non-English speaking. In the case of maids who are left with the children for a great part of the day when the parents are both at work, the children quickly acquire the language of the maid in order to communicate effectively Very often the maid begins to learn some English from the children. In other situations where English is not the first language of the home but is spoken by the parents sometimes, it soon becomes a strong second language when other factors begin to operate. These other factors are felt more strongly in the big towns of Malaysia. They are responsible for a great number of urban pre-school Malaysian children acquiring

English to differing degrees of proficiency Three main factors are easily identifiable. The first is the influence of peer groups and playmates in the same neighbourhood or in nursery school. Children at play face challenging communication situations which quickly lead to acquisition of the language necessary for communication. The second is the kindergarten, a feature that is fast becoming part of the lives of pre-school children in urban Malaysia. Here the medium of play, singing, games and other activities is often English though there are other kindergartens where other languages, like B.M. and Mandarin are used. The trend in kindergartens nowadays is towards using both English and B.M. as the medium of play and other organised activities, in order to prepare the children for primary school instruction which is in B.M. Children who attend these kindergartens very quickly learn to understand and speak English and this process is speeded up if they can use the language at home with their parents or friends. The last influence is even more pervasive. It is no other than the mass media, especially television. Cartoons, stories and other programmes on the air or on the screen daily provide children with ample opportunity to pick up English while following the adventures of their favourite characters. In fact, according to the mother of Murni, one of the subjects, all the English her daughter picked up must have been from T V as it is not spoken at home. Murni seldom plays with neighbours who speak English and she has only just started attending a kindergarten where B.M. is the medium of play. With these three factors operating in the urban areas of Malaysia, many urban Malaysian children, such as the six sample subjects of this study, are able to understand and speak English before they receive any formal instruction at school.

A great deal has been written about the process of second language acquisition in children. In urban Malaysia, we seem to take the ability of children speaking a second language for granted. They switch from speaking Tamil, Hokkien or Cantonese, English or Punjabi at home to Bahasa Malaysia in schools quite effortlessly And yet research reveals that there is so much that is involved. Nemoianu (1980:2) says that 'the seemingly effortless acquisition of a second language by very young children is not what it appears to be: no matter how impeccable the final production may be, children differ in the ways they reach it' Nemoianu goes on to say that acquiring a second language when you already have a reasonably good means of communication through your first language may be, to the child, a very puzzling situation — she suggests that the child's degree of tolerance to ambiguous situations plays a significant role in the ease with which the second language is learnt. Different children develop different strategies in handling the task of coping with the new social as well as language situation and these strategies account for their different degrees of success in achieving both tasks. The experience with the six children led to the belief that the remarkable advantage Malaysian children have is the 'naturalness' of the second or third language situation. There is no 'new social as well as language situation' Children in Malaysia are aware of the fact that there are other languages spoken by other people almost as soon as they themselves begin to communicate in one of the languages Hence the question of 'a very puzzling situation' and 'the child's degree of tolerance to ambiguous situations' does not really arise in the context of our Malay-

sian situation. This does not mean that all Malaysian children acquire a second or third language equally easily, there are individual differences but these differences are more strongly linked to other factors.

One of these other factors is the nature of the second or third language situation which the children are faced with. Children, when faced with challenging language situations, are motivated by the desire to master or acquire enough of the new language to participate in the situation. In the case of a play situation, this includes the desire to be an accepted member of the playgroup. In the case of the study carried out, the challenging situations faced by some of the children are as follows Malcolm, whose first language is English, quickly picked up Cantonese in order to communicate with the maid who was employed to look after him when his parents were out working. He needed the second language to communicate his needs to her and also to understand what she wanted him to do. Valerie and Shiao-Yng were exposed to some English at home but Cantonese and Hokkien became their first language as more was heard and spoken at home. The challenging second language situation came into their lives when they started attending kindergartens where English was the medium of play and activity The need to participate in such activities soon led to their acquiring proficiency in English to the extent that it became a strong second language used both at home as well as in school. Murni's challenge appeared in the form of attractive T V programmes for children, especially the cartoon series. She acquired enough of the second language to follow the programmes and in the process managed to develop some proficiency in speaking. The nature of the second language situation is varied in the Malaysian context and the different degrees of proficiency in the second language can be, to a large extent, dependent on the amount of challenge or pressure involved in the situation.

Another factor very closely related to motivation is the personality factor Briefly, it is hypothesized that the self-confident or secure person will be more able to encourage intake or will be more 'open' to the second language system. Traits relating to self-confidence (lack of anxiety, outgoing personality, self-esteem) are thus predicted to relate well to second language acquisition. Brown (1977.352) states that 'Presumably the person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego ' In the case of the six children involved in the study, there seemed to be no problem of lack of confidence. Self-confidence seems to be a trait of urban children especially around Petaling Jaya. There was no trace of anxiety in any of them as they went through the picture books talking about the pictures. Six books with attractive illustrations were used. They were about children and animals engaged in amusing activities. Each child had his or her own interpretation of the various activities in the books according to his or her own imagination and ability to communicate his or her thoughts. Besides talking about what was in the books, some of the more talkative children were prompted to narrate pieces of news by something they came across in the books These often concerned their own or their family's activities. A possible explanation of the self-confidence of these children is the fact that all six came from homes that could be considered upper middle-

class, and four of the children were only children while the other two were the elder of two children.

II. The six children involved in the study were all of varying levels of proficiency where the English language was concerned. Their different levels were obvious from a study of their tense expressions What is significant is that some features of their speech bear some relation to the different stages of development in first language acquisition. For example, Brown (1973:271) presents a diagram to show the order of acquisition of 14 grammatical morphemes in his three sample subjects, Adam, Eve and Sarah. An interesting point to note is that what Brown terms the 'contractible auxiliary' form is ranked last in order of acquisition, at the end of Stage 5 of his study If this can be interpreted as demanding a certain degree of proficiency then the results of the study was validated for one of the subjects in the study of the six Malaysian children, Suba, who used the most number of contracted forms of the auxiliary 'be' — she was the most proficient speaker She produced sentences like the following:

'The boy's wiping the snake.'
'They're taking the snake downstairs.'

It must be noted that to Suba English was more of a first language. Although she also spoke Tamil, it was more a second language to her The other children were more inconsistent. Sometimes they used the contractible auxiliary as in.

'They're sleeping.'

and

'He's pouring some coffee.'

Sometimes, they left out the auxiliary as in.

'He riding a horse.'
'The big dog biting again.'

And in the case of Valerie, she was consistent in not using the auxiliary In many of her samples even the subject was dropped. For example, she said.

'sitting on the chair '
'cleaning the boy boots.'

Another feature of form was the predominance of the main verb, unchanged in the speech of the six children. The use of this form of the verb accounted for 51.33% of the verbs used in the samples collected This could be a link to the verb forms in the other languages spoken by the children, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Malay where the verb form remains unchanged for tense or it could be a developmental feature in language acquisition, as it occurs in first language acquisition as well Francis (1975·94) remarks that the main verb, that which carries the main semantic weight of some action, operation,

movement or state of some person or object, is the first part of the verb to appear and remains unchanged for several months. In her study of the first language acquisition of a boy, Jonathan, she found that it was the expansion of the main verb that played a large part in moving Jonathan's speech significantly towards grammatical acceptability during the three months of observation, allowing him to express something of the ideas embodied in tense and mood. The study of the six pre-school Malaysian children revealed that the expansion of the main verb — adding of inflections or changing of form — was the key factor that distinguished the more proficient speakers from the others who clung on to the main verb in its basic form. However, Francis goes on to say that it is not surprising for children to adopt main verbs in English because, in the language, these appear to be the most intelligible forms. They are used in imperatives in both second and first person forms, as in 'Make a tower' and 'Let's make a tower ' They also occur in modal construction. Thus they form the heart of the expression of instructions, demonstrations and intentions which loom large in communication with very young children. Therefore the high percentage of verbs unmarked for tense or time does not only feature in the speech of children speaking English as a second language. An interesting feature in the study carried out was the response to the questions using the form 'did' followed by the unmarked main verb The children, including the most proficient of them, constantly responded to such questions in the following ways.

'What did he do?'

Harris. 'The man catch it and kill it.'

'Why did he fall?'

Shiao-Yng: 'Because the snake take out so hard.'

'What did you see at the market?'

Suba. 'I see lots and lots of things.'

The responses of the children revealed that 'did' did not make an impact as being indicative of past time or actions carried out in the past The emphasis as far as meaning was concerned fell on the question word and the unmarked main verb. This contributed to the high percentage of unmarked main verbs as they were used by the children to refer to a great deal of past actions

Another feature of the speech of children acquiring a second language is that of vocabulary acquisition. Studies of second language acquisition in children have revealed that verbs became productive at a later stage Yoshida (1977) in an MA-TESL thesis found that her subject, Miki, acquired verb vocabulary items rather slowly Among the words acquired by her subject, general nominals (concrete objects) indicated the highest score: 60.0% Action words (verbs) showed the second highest: 13.0% Among the general nominals 'food' was the most productive; 'animals', which are universally

acquired early in first language acquisition, were also learned fast by this second language learner; and 'vehicles' and 'outdoor' objects revealed the subject's interest in the world. Yoshida observed that verbs were acquired in memorized forms such as 'sit down' and 'come on' which were frequently used in school. The subject did not use verbs as a separate grammatical category even after seven months of speaking English. Whenever verbs were necessary in his sentences he used the copula verbs for any main verb. The following are some examples of such utterances.

| | |
|---|---|
| is | Miki is submarine! [I saw a submarine in Disneyland.] |
| | Miki is lunch today [I'm going to stay for lunch today.] |
| am | I am! I am! [I do], or [I did, I did] |
| | I am jacket. [I brought a jacket today, or 'have?'] |
| are | You are chocolate? ( ) [Do you have chocolate at home?] |

(Hatch (ed), 1978: 96)

The six Malaysian pre-school children provided very contrasting results as far as verbs were concerned. On the whole, the general range of verbs used by the children were quite large. Even Murni, who was just able to string together words to form short, broken sentences, was able to produce a variety of verbs. This could have been stimulated by the action-oriented pictures that were used. The remarkable feature of the children's speech was that they were never really 'put off' by any lack of vocabulary to express themselves. Murni made up for any verbs which did not occur to her at the moment by using verbs with which she was familiar in a very unusual way For example she said:

'He ear go to the floor '

when the verb 'fell' escaped her It was obvious that 'fell' again eluded her in the following sentence:

'He fall down, the paint go to his head.'

She could produce 'fall' but not 'fell' Later, she even used 'go' to substitute for 'knock' as in.

'That thing go to the head.'

when she meant that a hammer knocked a boy's head. Murni also used 'do' to help her when other words failed to occur to her at the moment. She produced sentences like:

'He do round.'

meaning that the animal was going round in circles and.

'He do house.'

meaning that someone was building a house. The interesting feature of her speech was that sometimes she could use the more appropriate verbs as in.

'He turn around.'

This indicated that there were some words present in her vocabulary which sometimes failed to present themselves when needed — hence she fell back on a substitute expression. Harris produced one expression.

'The water climbed down.'

when he meant that the water was overflowing from a basin. Here one is able to appreciate the fact that vocabulary never really poses a problem to children learning a language. They are imaginative enough to use other expressions, which may, as in Harris' utterance, prove to be more picturesque than the usual vocabulary None of the Malaysian children seemed to have the problem of using verbs as grammatical categories in their utterances. Not one utterance was recorded where the subject used a copula form instead of a main verb form. Studies of vocabulary acquisition by first language learners reveal a great deal of variation in the learning process. A comparison of Yoshida's study in this area with the Malaysian study shows much variation for second language learners as well.

Those who have studied children's speech both in first and second language acquisition have noted that some of their subjects' sentences were memorized wholes and patterns. Brown (1973) hypothesized that prefabrication routines in children were the result of very high input frequency of the structure that was, at that time, beyond the child's linguistic maturation level He gives the example of WH-questions 'What's that?' and What doing?' which the children learned to produce on appropriate occasions before any other WH-questions were formed. Later on, when they were producing all other types of WH-questions, these remained untouched for some time. Brown considers these memorized routines as 'unassimilated fragments.' Further research, especially among second language acquirers, has revealed that routines are far more significant than 'unassimilated fragments.' Fillmore (1976) has presented the most complete study of routines and patterns in child second language acquisition. He examined the speech produced by five acquirers of English as a second language in an English-speaking kindergarten. Fillmore views the strategy of acquiring formulaic speech as central to the learning of language — it puts the learners in a position to perform the analysis which is prerequisite to acquisition. The formulas constitute the linguistic material on which a large part of the children's analytic activities could be carried out. In his study he noted the fact that all five Spanish-speaking children quickly acquired repertoires of formulaic expression in English and knew how to use them more or less appropriately — putting them to immediate and frequent use. He points out that the linguistic environment of the nursery class and the playground was conducive to the learning of routines and patterns. The acquirer felt the need to acquire some language which would give the impression of ability to speak it, so that friends would keep on trying to communicate with him. The study

of the six Malaysian pre-school children was not carried out in a situation where such routines, if any, would have surfaced. The situation would have required an informal interaction environment where other children communicate in English. In the study carried out with the six children there was no evidence of routines and patterns being used in the children's speech. It is this writer's belief that routines and patterns are not so essential a strategy in the Malaysian context because Malaysian children are very aware of language differences among themselves Hence, an inability to communicate in the language of play does not result in ostracism. The children accept and adapt more easily The second language acquirer is not pressured into adopting routines and patterns just to continue participating in activities. He or she is given more time to assimilate the language while still participating physically but not verbally This is the result of a multi-lingual society where allowances are made for language differences. In other studies where research in this area was carried out, the second language acquirer was often in a kind of 'threatened' position, he was thrown into an environment where he had to speak English or face being excluded from activities.

III. It is clear that second language acquisition among children in informal interactions with their age-peers is a process of language learning that has important pedagogical implications. Opportunities are abundant for child-child interaction in the target language, not only in the playground, but also in the classroom under direct supervision by the teacher — the teacher as planner and co-ordinator of child-child 'happenings' in the classroom. The teacher will thus have access to the appropriate use of language by the learners in dynamic interaction with their age-peers. The rich potential of this approach is clearly apparent in our Malaysian primary school, where children whose first language is Bahasa Malaysia, can provide the necessary interaction for their peers who are acquiring the language. Those who speak English as a first language or strong language can be of tremendous help in peer-group activities in the language class

Dulay and Burt (1973) assert that our knowledge of the language acquisition process tells us that exposing the child to a natural communication situation is sufficient to activate his language learning process. The question now arises as to what are the crucial characteristics of a natural communication situation for second language learning, for it is this that one seeks to create from the first day the child enters a language class in school. The writers of the article are of the opinion that very often in language classes the emphasis is on form and not on the 'message' or content of the verbal exchange. Hence most language teaching materials focus on the structure to be taught, often with the result that the message of the sentences taught seems meaningless to both teachers and children. This may be because language teachers are supposed to teach language and not anything else, just as social studies or science teachers are supposed to teach social science or science respectively Language which is considered to be 'form' is thus separated from 'content' which is meaning. Thus, to the extent that form replaces content, language classes are not natural communication situations. Incorporating the most important characteristic of a natural communication situation would mean making it a medium of one or two areas or topics so that 'form' and 'content' blend

without any special effort on the part of the teacher The areas could be topics like 'Customs or Festivals Around The World', 'Civic-consciousness' or even 'Food and Health Science' This would take the load off the form in language lessons and give new meaning to language learning in class. In Malaysia, where cultural diversity presents a variety of topic areas, the language teacher has plenty of meaningful material to capture the children's imagination while providing language input.

Along with the concept of providing meaningful communication situations comes the new concept of the successful second language teacher Language specialists may not necessarily be the best teachers for children eager to progress in a second language. The language teacher who is the most successful will probably be one who does not even make her children aware that she's teaching a language. He or she should be a lively personality with a good command of the language who will sing, dance or act with the children, as well as plan activities for them These activities must be of a diverse nature, hence the language teacher must also be enthusiastic about and interested in nature, science, social studies and a whole range of social activities.

In Malaysia, where children speaking a second or third language is not an unusual phenomenon, we tend to treat the process of acquisition rather casually We often do not recognise the significance of the achievement nor the potential for second language learning in the early years of school. More noise is made about the poor language results in the school-leaving examination and even greater fuss is made about poor second language performance at undergraduate and post-graduate level. It is time we realise that the root of the problem lies in what is going on in Standard One, Two and Three. Children are naturally eager second language learners — let us not pass up the opportunity to help them become confident and proficient speakers We would not then be faced with the problem of trying to motivate older learners.

**Notes**

1. The examples quoted in pages 58-63 are taken from Ambrose A. (1978). 'A Syntactic Study of How Some Pre-School Malaysian Children Express Tense in Their Use of English', unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Malaya.

**Reference**

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