TOWARDS THE ULTIMATE TARGET OF L2 ACQUISITION: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant falling rate in Malaysians' English proficiency in recent years. This paper studies a proficient English L2 user aiming to investigate the case's engagement in learning English from birth to primary 6. It is hoped to find out the implications (possible procedures and strategies) for moulding a child into a competent English user in the non-English setting in Malaysia. "Reflexivity", a qualitative research method, was employed. The sample's parent reflected and detailed the child's learning journey with evidence of learning and achievements. Apart from the thorough recount on the child's engagement with the L2 before formal education, the sample's writings done in primary school were randomly selected and scrutinized with a text-analysing digital tool "Text Inspector©" whose analysis results were mapped with CEFR levels to examine his progression towards the mastery of the target language. The findings demonstrate that, first, exposing a child to English right after birth greatly triggers the learning process and the effects are significant; second, the provision of rich family literacy greatly complements the lacking of English environment; third, "imitation" can be an essential strategy to expedite the learner's command of English.

Keywords: *L2 Acquisition, Family Literacy, Non-English Environment, Child ESL Learner, Imitation, Malaysia*

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

1. The fear of confusion in learning two languages is groundless (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013). The sample's active absorption of the English sounds during his infancy proves that early exposure to the English language is an ideal way to get L2 children familiar with the target language's phonological features (Paradis, 2008).
2. The sample became an independent L2 young reader before school due to shared reading and provision of graded readers, which significantly enhance his capacity of comprehension, mastery of vocabulary and sensitivity to English structures (Albay, 2017).
3. With proven procedures and strategies, it is possible to nurture an L2 learner to become a proficient English user on a par with an average English native speaker even without the general English environment.

Research Objectives

The purpose of the research is to investigate a successful ESL learner and describe in detail how he manages to master the English language in 12 years from birth to Year 6 in primary school. With reference to various perspectives including cognitive development, socio-cultural influence and learning activities, the researcher seeks to unravel the underlying strategies that contribute to the effectiveness of L2 acquisition. Thus the research question is:

What is the best procedure for a young child to acquire English as a Second Language (ESL) in the non-English context?

The stunning dropping rate of the Malaysian English proficiency has initiated this study. It is significant as the pressing issue is general in countries without sufficient English environment, and parents and educators need a feasible and practical procedure to nurture their children into a proficient English user in view of the importance of English in the career pursuit and professionalism.

Methodology

Reflexivity or reflective research, a qualitative method, was applied in this study. The research target, Tony and his mother, were engaged to assist in the research. Tony's mother recounted the details about what was provided and how Tony efficiently acquired the knowledge of English while immersed in the non-English environment since he was born. Tony's mother as a family member was able to observe Tony's English learning process closely pertaining to the materials used, family support and acquisition strategies.

This research was initiated only recently, so searching for the traces of learning from more than a decade ago became a great challenge. No audio-visual recordings were found for analysis. What could be found were the written pieces done during the primary schooling. The period between the birth and primary education was recalled from memory and referring to diary records.

The written works during primary school by Tony were used as the data to illustrate the progress of him in English learning after kindergarten. For more objective analysis, "Text Inspector©" (textinspector.com), a web tool for analysing texts, was employed.

Results

Numerous research shows that the environment plays a key role to L2 learners, which can also be found evidently in the sample's learning journey. The affective factor does not interfere much in the sample's L2 acquisition as a child focuses more on communication rather than self-perception (Brown, 2014). This also gives a good opportunity for the mother of the sample to create a setting that facilitates the ESL learning process without worries about her child's resistance to the target language. Before kindergarten, the sample was exposed to audio stimuli, shared reading, graded readers and animations by English native speakers. Reading and writing have been generously brought into the sample's daily living space since infancy.

It is ideal to engage a kindergarten with English environment to sharpen a child's spoken English. During primary school, students speak their mother tongues to communicate, so to raise a child's English standard is another challenge. Exposing the learner to well-written writings and encouraging imitation from memory could be another recommended strategy.

Findings

First, being exposed to the English language since birth greatly benefits a child in acquiring the English language, especially in terms of pronunciation and morpho-syntactic

structures. This then empowers the child to engage in more English-based learning activities which undoubtedly further enhance his strength in the use of the target language.

Second, the rich family literacy with adult family's consistent support in engaging the child in L2 interaction and learning activities contributes significantly to L2 acquisition (Wasik and Van Horn, 2015).

Third, imitating works by L1 writers is a reliable strategy that helps speed up the learning process of L2 learners (Geist, 2005).

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Author's Biography

Mooi Tin Cheng, received her Master Degree in Applied Linguistics from Macquarie University in Australia. She currently works as a senior lecturer and programme coordinator at the Division of English Studies, Southern University College, where she teaches Linguistics, Educational Psychology and TESL related subjects. Ms Cheng has engaged in teaching English as a second language to various levels of students for more than 20 years. She also writes books for ESL learners and is an active English-to-Chinese translator. Her current research is mainly about L2 acquisition, family literacy, and ESL pedagogy.