

Multicultural Education: The Influence of Cultural Diversity on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: *In Malaysia, the teaching and learning of English language is regarded as a second language. This is due to the fact that Malaysia owns diverse cultures with various languages used among people. Therefore, this paper will discuss about the influence of cultural diversity on second language acquisition among Malaysian students. From the analysis of selected articles, it is evident that cultural diversity place some influences in the learning and acquisition of second language. Although the cultural diversity has been viewed as the elements that bound the acquisition of the target language, it is noticed that there is a strong influence of native language over the learning of English among Malaysian learners. Therefore, it should be taken into consideration that cultural diversity may indirectly affluence the learning or acquisition of the second language among the learners.*

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, Cultural Diversity, Second Language Acquisition*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a culturally diverse country with many different ethnicities and religions. The three largest ethnic groups in Malaysia: Malays, Chinese and Indians are complemented by minority ethnic races including the Orang Asli and people from East Malaysia such as the Iban, Melanau, Kadazan, and others. For that reason, the existence of various ethnic groups in Malaysia has resulted in variety of instructional strategies in education. Students bring to school, not only differing racial and ethnic heritages, but also a wide range approaches to learning. Therefore, it is important for teachers to recognize the impact that cultural differences may have on their students' education. As stated by Gay (1994), "*teachers who are aware of the impacts of cultural differences are more likely to bring children's different cultures into the classroom*". Teachers in multicultural classrooms must always be open to their students and strive to get to know their students inside and outside of class. This may help them to build a strong relationship and reduce

gaps between their students and themselves. However, are these teachers aware of cultural differences among their students? Hence, this paper will reveal the insights of cultural diversity in classroom and how it would influence the second language acquisition in Malaysia.

Creating multicultural classrooms is a must for all teachers and educators. It includes the restructuring the curriculum and creating a positive atmosphere for communication across different cultures. However, schools in Malaysia still need to do more on this area as Yusof (2008) found that there is a cultural gap of students' academic performance. It is important for teachers to identify the cultural diversity among their students. This is because teachers who have ethnocentric and racist attitudes toward their students often fail to meet the academic and societal needs of the students they teach. Teachers must be aware of their students' diversity in terms of their racial, ethnic, socio-economic, cultural and linguistic background. A cultural gap in many of the nation's schools could hamper the educators to better serve their students from different cultures. This cultural gap between teachers and students can be a major force in students' academic performance and it may also contribute to achievement gaps among different student groups. Students have been challenged to examine cultures from different points of view and to be aware of cultural differences (Barrett et al., 2004). In short it is important for teachers to become more aware to students from different cultures to make the classroom environment more conducive for teaching and learning.

1.1 Multicultural Education (MCE)

Multicultural education (MCE) is defined as any basic form of education for all students. It requires people to eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination in schools. Multicultural education is also defined as interactions among teachers and students and the instructional strategies used in schools. According to James Banks (2001), multicultural education is defined as "*an idea, an educational reform movement and process*". Multicultural education comprises theories and practices to encourage equitable access for students from various groups. It encourages them to work together toward social change. Multicultural education affirms the multiple identities that students bring to their learning. Marshal (2002) defines multicultural education as: "*a vision of schooling based on the democratic ideas of justice and equality*".

Based on the definitions, it is portrayed that multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students should have an equal opportunity to attend school regardless their gender, ethnic, social class and other cultural characteristics. As we all know, Malaysia inherited multilingual and multiethnic society from colonial policies in early 1900s. Language policy and language planning in multilingualism should be emphasized under the multiracial and multilingual setting. In terms of language planning, the appropriate development of all languages is important in multilingual society. After the independence, the language planning setting established concern towards others as well as generous values in Malaysia. However, the impact of policy

developments that occurred in the late 1960s had a deep effect on the country until the present day.

In Malaysia, ethnicity will always be linked with the language and education which is indicated by the continuous of Tamil and Mandarin schools. Bahasa Malaysia is used as the medium of instruction in national school while English as a compulsory subject alongside the Tamil and Mandarin subjects. Ironically, it is believed that the national school increased more on segmentation rather than the desired national integration in using Bahasa Malaysia. Some Indians and Chinese parents are still sending their children to the national type school as they believed that this type of school suited culturally and linguistically to their communities. As Malaysia is typified by three major ethnic groups, education system is the best medium for these groups to work together. Some scholars argued that school in Malaysia have rarely offered an enthusiastic welcome for student differences. However, it is also noted that a multicultural classroom may use these differences as a foundation for growth and development. They may live along various cultural communities while maintaining their own original identities.

1.2 James Banks Five Dimensions

A major goal of multicultural education is to reform schools and higher institutions to enable students from diverse racial, ethnic and social class groups experience educational equality (Banks, 2006). In order to achieve the goal, teachers and educators must be aware of the definition of multicultural education and put efforts to implement some multicultural practices in class. Banks (2001) identified five dimensions of multicultural education that serve as a framework within the multicultural education. These dimensions include content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy and lastly empowering school culture.

2.0 MULTICULTURALISM AND DIVERSITY

Multiculturalism and diversity are two terms that describe how people differ to each other based on their race, ethnicity, beliefs, cultures and others. According to Miksch et al. (2003), diversity includes a wider variety of social groups than race and ethnicity. Besides, cultural diversity refers to an organizing concept for acknowledging the human attributes that are different from our own. We may identify the diversity by looking at the image of the people represent. It is easy to notice an African American, an Indian, an old woman and a young man as what we observed refers to visible diversity. Visible diversity is generally those external things that we cannot change such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, and physical attributes. Meanwhile, Chen (1998) demonstrated the invisible diversity which includes those attributes that cannot be seen visibly, such as work experience, marital status, educational background, income, religious beliefs, or socioeconomic status. For example, we may assume a young man walking to the hall as a Chinese with good looking appearance; but, we may not know that he is already married, he has travelled to Europe for many times and most importantly, he is actually a Muslim. Thus, this

is what we call personal diversity which means a combination of visible and invisible diversity. So, when we embrace diversity, we are actually recognizing and valuing the uniqueness of each individual. While each individual is unique, he or she generally has many attributes that are similar to those of others. In our daily life, we may find someone who has similar appearance as we are but, he or she probably has more different attributes than we think.

2.2 Cultural Differences

Culture is a term that represents different things to different individuals. Most definitions of culture portray it as the way of life of certain group of people in a particular society. Ukeje (1992) added that culture is shaped from the people's way of life as figured out from their both material and non-material aspects of their life. Thus, culture could illustrate some obvious similarities and differences between people within the same community that fosters a feeling of oneness. Certain features of culture are highlighted as culture is not genetically inherited but it is shared by members of society, culture is derived from one generation to the next generation and it is created through the process of adjustment and accommodation to the social setting. Cultural theorists believe that culture affects one's personality and individual difference as it has a great contribution to the development of people's values and beliefs. When dealing with individuals from various backgrounds regardless the situation, some factors such as ethnic group and socioeconomic status often take place to the possibility of confusing the cultural influences and individual influences. Although race and culture are connected to the individual differences; but they are essentially not the same thing.

2.3 Impact of Cultural Differences

The impact of understanding the difference between race and culture, and differences unique to an individual is a first step in the process of developing cultural competency (Diz, 2009). According to Gorodnichenko (2012), cultural competence is a form of attitudes, skills, behaviours, and policies that enable people to work cooperatively in cross-cultural situations. The knowledge gained about different cultures helps to achieve a better understanding in order to improve services given. This is meant to diverse populations and community relationships in general. In short, there are many factors that should be taken into consideration in understanding people and behaviour by comparing their cultures. When dealing with diverse populations throughout the world, the differences between individuals as well as the differences between groups based on race and culture need to be given concentration as they can also lead to discomfort and uneasiness.

Since culture plays a critical role in learning, cultural competence may help teachers to become knowledgeable about their students' distinctive cultural backgrounds. Teachers may use the students' different culture as a benefit for them to diversify their teaching strategies. It also helps teachers to address student achievement gaps and meet accountability requirement.

Developing a culturally competent attitude is actually an ongoing process. It is important to view all people as unique individuals and realize that their experiences, beliefs, values and language affect their ways of interacting with others and the larger community. It is known that difference also exist within cultures other than between cultures. It is wrong to assume that a common culture is shared by all members of a racial, linguistic or religious group.

3.0 DISCUSSION

In Malaysian schools' unique language environment, sociolinguistic competence contributes to Malaysian students English language proficiency. Teaching language is not just about learning the rudiments of the language but also various cultural refinements (Mohan et. al., 2010). This is prevalent as Malaysia is a country of diverse cultures. In one language class, we can gather various cultural backgrounds of the learners and this should be taken into consideration by the language teachers. Having to learn English as a second language in Malaysian setting, teachers must tolerate on the students' cultural and social background as this will contribute to their attainment in the language proficiency. Acquiring English requires different way as compared to acquiring the students' mother tongue. The structure of the target language (English) is different from the structure in the mother tongue for example Chinese and Malay. Mohan et. al. (2010) denoted that unlike English, Malay and Chinese languages do not have overt tense and agreement features. As such, the Malay and Chinese speakers of English would have to acquire English functional categories like tenses and agreement with their associated formal features in acquiring English as the second language. Therefore, this diversity of cultures and background serves as a medium to be considered in acquiring a second language case.

Even so, as Malaysia is also made up of different background setting, the issue of rural versus urban area places another dominant role in language acquisition. Saadiyah (2009) claimed that many urban children who use English as their first language or dominant language at home were able to master English well compared to the majority of children, especially those from rural areas who were predominantly ethnic Malay. Previously, Thiyagarajah (2003) asserted that the learning of English in rural schools in Malaysia has always been a major problem for educators as they struggle to pull proficiency levels up against a backdrop where the language is almost non-existent other than the few periods of English per week for learners where English is viewed as a foreign language. Another view raised by Peter et al. (2013) where rural students, however, are in an environment which English is a foreign language and they have practically zero opportunity to practice it as their peers are also facing the same predicament, their parents are not educated enough to give them the necessary educational support and their families' socioeconomic status do not allow them easy access to books, CD's, and even television in some cases. All these demonstrate to the fact that locality of the students may also contribute to the challenges in acquiring the second language in Malaysia.

Furthermore, Nalini, Shamim, Geraldine & Laura (2013) in a study have investigated the cultural influence among Malaysian students during group learning in an English class. This study focuses on the Malay and Chinese students' commitment in group learning. It is noticed that Malay students from institution A who are engaged in group work performed well. Results showed significant improvement among learners between the pre and post- test. This result is in line with Ismail & Tahir's study (2011) which denoted group work enhances the language proficiency of students. Moreover, the Malay students also said that they felt easier to work in groups because they had been living in an extended family. The study also revealed that in Institution B, the learners who are mostly Chinese improved at certain level by learning in groups; however there was no significant difference. According to Ku & Lohr, (2009), Chinese learners do not express their feelings freely, they prefer to sit quietly or just nod their head to show agreement or even pretending to know something. This is because they prefer to work individually on their project (Ku & Lohr, 2009).

Amerrudin & Sarimah (2012) also found that the Chinese students were more productive in terms of the number of words and sentences produced during the oral narration. The aim of the research was to compare the performance of Malay and Chinese students in spoken English at the secondary school level. The results indicated that most of the Chinese learners want to learn English with a motive to get a better job. According to researches, students were found to be more instrumentally motivated to acquire English for the drive of communication, study and future career. There is a need to improve the level of English acquisition in Malaysian students as those people who are fluent in English have better career opportunities (Yahaya et. al., 2011).

Furthermore, the Chinese students used a larger number of word types than the Malay students, an indication that they had a more diverse or wider vocabulary. However, the ratio showed that they only produced a relatively larger amount of diverse vocabulary than the Malay students. This finding is supported by Darmi & Albion (2012) who suggest that although students have adequate input in the target language, they feel shy and introvert and it impacts their ability to communicate. Perhaps this is the reason the Malay students could not produce enough English words during their speaking test. This is because Malay students have the feelings that when they speak in English, fellow Malay friends might see them as trying to be westernized or they are trying to boast. Other than that, if students feel stressed or anxious during communication, it will also hinder them to perform well especially in L2. The final finding suggests that the Chinese students have a bigger percentage of word types compared to the Malay students.

Meanwhile, a study by Kesumawati, Nor Zakiah, Norsimah & Nor Hashimah (2011) shows that cultural factors such as ethnic group, demographic area and socioeconomic are some of the main factors that limit the process of second language acquisition among non-native speakers in Johor. This study which was conducted in three secondary schools in Johor with 315 Form Two students as the respondents who had seven good years of learning English showed the

connection between the cultural factors associated with the students' target language acquisition. The schools involved in this are considered as an urban school, sub-urban school and rural school respectively. The whole percentage indicates that more than half of the students in all three schools have failed to understand the usage of English 'be' copula and that disables them to use the form correctly. It also shows how students failed to understand this grammatical form because Malay language has no such form in its grammar rules. The complexity of the rules in the usage and placement of English determiners does contribute to confusion in application among learners of this target language. Malay language does not have parallel item for the English possessive determiner. First, second and third person pronoun such as *saya*, *awak*, & *mereka*, can be used as both noun phrase to refer to specific person and also as pre-modifier to indicate possession like *buku saya* and *bola mereka*; and because of this difference in structures, students may have resorted to direct translation in the search for the correct answer.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Although the cultural diversity has been viewed as the elements that bound the acquisition of the target language by different syntactic and structures in both languages, Musa et al. (2012) has stated that there is a strong influence of the national language or *Bahasa Malaysia* over the learning of English among Malaysian learners. This is a result of cultural diversity. Many Malaysians have viewed English as a difficult subject to learn that leads them to depend heavily on translation and dictionary use to find meanings. It is also found that a lack of support to use English in the home environment and the community is one of the constraints to acquire the language (Musa et al., 2012). Apart from that, Nor Hashimah Jalaludin et al. (2008) has also found syntactical differences between English and Malay in her study. She concluded that the linguistics differences between both languages are one of the major factors influencing students' incompetence to successfully acquire English literacy.

Teaching English to all students is regarded as a tool for cultural understanding and communication among students. Tan (2003) in his study revealed that in eliminating cultural diversity, teachers may utilize assimilation, amalgamation or cultural pluralism approach to hold their students' attentions in learning the second language. The differences in race and ethnicity, learning styles, socio-economy and linguistic differences are not bound to students' abilities to learn and master their non-mother tongue language. It is strongly recommended that enhancing the mastery of the English language among students can help overcome the problem of communication with others in the school and outside the school (Tan, 2003). According to Tan (2003), if a teacher can understand the students and vice versa, then achievement can continue. Therefore, teachers must aim to increase student achievement regardless of their linguistic diversity issues because it may enhance students' understanding on their opportunity to learn from the school environment. These factors should be taken into consideration in planning a teaching and learning process in a multicultural classroom.

Abdullah & Chandran (2009) shows that English has become an international language so it is not limited to only native speakers in English-speaking countries. Second language speakers of English use English to communicate not only with English native speakers but also with other foreign language users of English. The teaching of English is becoming much more confined with those of the target culture in many countries. This is a necessity as language could not be totally divorced from culture. The adoption of English as a second language means to a certain extent the acceptance of Western culture and values (Abdullah & Chandran, 2009). In addition to communication, learners who are said to have acquired a language are those who are able to align themselves with the culture of the target language. As a suggestion, English teachers should be exposed to more linguistic knowledge and multicultural competence to better equip them in teaching the language and to better serve students with different cultural background.

5.0 IMPLICATION

As English is being widely used all over the world, students need to learn this language to enable them to compete in this fast growing world. No matter which ethnicity they belong to, students need to have strategies to master the English language. Rather than just using English inside the classroom, students can also use the language at home. It is not wrong to practice using English at home and school as it would not harm the identity of our own culture or tradition. Thus, parents, teachers and students themselves should realize the importance of mastering English as their second language. English is not only a global language but it is a main medium of interaction all over the world. Therefore, for educators to know what their students think or believe about language learning is a good way to create a suitable multicultural classroom environment and help educators decide teaching strategies which make their lessons closer to the set objectives. It should be considered that cultural diversity may indirectly influence the learning or acquisition of the second language among the learners. Then, the learning or acquiring of second language can take place effectively.

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