Full Length Research Paper

Success structure for accelerated acquisition of English by young ESL learners

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This is an investigation into the accelerated acquisition of English among young ESL learners in an International School. It employed an ethnographic case study approach where data were gathered through non-participant observations, unstructured interviews, relevant documents, students' portfolios, field notes and biographical details. The sample consisted of a small group of five year old ESL learners with no or limited proficiency in English upon entering the nursery school. Miles and Huberman's general view of qualitative data analysis was used in this study; "*consisting of 3 concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification.*" (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and Merriam's (1998) proposal which required field data analysis done in conjunction with data collection. Findings from the study indicate that a supportive linguistic environment which provides opportunities for engagement in the language both inside and outside the classroom where both processes of acquisition and learning take place in a relaxed and meaningful manner is instrumental in boosting learners' confidence and sustaining their motivation for continual success in language development. Conclusions drawn from the findings of the study imply that the support structure of success for accelerated acquisition of English would necessarily involve the positive interplay of the four basic constructs of language education, namely: the context, the teacher, the learner and the curriculum. These constructs frame the structure of success for both acquisition and learning in the accelerated language development of learners and therefore have to be accounted for in any consideration of effective learning of English as a second or foreign language.

Key words: Success structure accelerated acquisition young ESL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Education in Malaysia has always played a major role in integrating its multi –ethnic society. Apart from its indigenous people, Malaysia is also an immigrant country in which people from all around the world come to its shores mostly for economic reasons. Before the Second World War, Malaysia was the only country in South East Asia where the immigrant races outnumbered the indigenous people (Gaudart, 1992). This phenomenon had a great impact on the education scenario in Malaysia. The various immigrants namely the Chinese and the Indians who had settled here raised their families using the education models of their own countries which resulted in schools being set up along ethnic lines and conducted in different languages. This naturally alarmed the government that was trying very hard to develop national unity among its population at that time. Therefore, in 1971, the government of Malaysia passed the Education Enactment Bill to work towards a common education system for all, using Malay as a medium of instruction up to university level in an attempt to standardize the education system (Gaudart, 1992). A common content curriculum was made compulsory throughout the school system.

While majority of the public schools are fully funded by the government, some are, however, partially funded as these schools have the financial support of their own powerful and influential patrons in the business circle. There are also Chinese schools, which are funded by their own patrons but are also controlled by the government's education policies. There is also an alternative set

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of formal education system that has been accepted in the general education system of Malaysia. Among them are the privately run international schools which basically cater to the educational needs of the expatriates' children living in Malaysia, temporarily or otherwise. These schools also accept local students from age's three to six who have obtained special written permission from the Ministry of Education to study in such schools. These international schools do not fall under the government's educational policy and are allowed to use their own curriculum based on their own country's educational model, be it American, British or Australian. They are, however, monitored and advised by the Malaysian Minis-try of Education on certain areas of concern.

Uplands started out as a boarding school as it was more convenient for the children to live in the school rather than travel up and down the hill on a daily basis. The threat of the Communist insurgency at the time also made it safer for the children to live on the hill, away from any form of threat that came from the jungles on the lowlands. The school gradually grew in size and in 1976, day pupils were being accepted and the school was run like any normal day school. However, in 1977, a decision was made by the school to leave the hill and move to the lowlands. Uplands spent short periods at a number of sites but eventually settled at its present site in Tanjung Bungah. The school has a very successful ESL program for pupils who come with little or no English.

The standard of English among Malaysian pupils began to deteriorate with this change of medium of instruction in national schools even with 11 years of formal teaching/leaning of English. The Malaysian government began to view this phenomenon very seriously and in a surprise move in 2002 made it compulsory that all national schools were to teach Science and Mathematics in English. On top of this, Form 4 students had to take additional English lessons. This definitely showed the seriousness of the government in trying to check the declining standard of English among Malaysian students. But here in our own backyard at Uplands International School pupils are acquiring English within only six months with the same entry level of the language as the national school pupils. Perhaps it has many facilities that the national schools do not have but that does not mean we cannot learn from Uplands' experience. Therefore, it would amount to brazen neglect of professional responsibility if we do not study how this could come about as the findings could have profound implications for our own pupils and teachers.

This is because linguistic environment is a major factor in determining the speed at which learners learn (Ellis, 1985). The discussion of the role of the linguistic environment in the success structure for accelerated acquisition of English by the young English as second language (ESL) learners in this study was conducted largely within the framework of the interactionist view of language acquisition where the acquisition of English is the result of an interaction of the learner and the linguistic environment (Ellis, 1985). Linguistic environment in formal education largely rested in the language classroom.

Shrum and Glisan (1994) stated that "*findings from researchers on SLA have significant implications concerning classroom language instructions.*" According to them, acquisition may be facilitated by providing the following elements in the classroom:

- Comprehensible input in the target language,
- Opportunities for students to negotiate meaning in the target language,
- Opportunities for students to interact communicatively with one another in the target language,
- A non-threatening environment in the classroom

These findings supported the idea that classroom instruction played a critical role in facilitating language acquisition and in promoting students' academic achievement. In this study we have included another important factor the *teacher* and the sub-variables that come with it:

- Planning of lessons
- Strategies, techniques and tactics
- Classroom management skills

Because the setting of this study is an International School where English is not only the medium of instruction in the classroom but also a medium of communication in the wider context of the school outside the classroom, the context of learning provides socially situated opportunities for negotiation of meaning through interactive discourse which learners, peers and teachers jointly construct. As such the term 'linguistic environment' as used in this paper will encompass the parameters of context, learner, teacher and curriculum. Each of these parameters will be viewed as an essential component of the support structure of success for the accelerated acquisition of English of the young ESL learners in this study.

Purpose of the study

The focus of this study was to explore and determine the factors that influence the successful English language acquisition among young pupils in an International School in Penang, Malaysia. These young pupils came with no or limited proficiency in English and were placed in the ESL (English as a Second Language) programme. Their ages ranged from 5 to 6 years old. They had managed to communicate in English after having spent less than 6 months in the programme. The pupils in Uplands came from all over the globe, bringing with them various cultures as well as languages. More importantly, they came with varying levels of proficiency in English. They were enrolled in an English medium school where all subjects were being taught in English and all other instructions

were given in English as well. Given this scenario and the phenomenal rate at which these young children acquired the language, the researchers felt it was crucial that a study was done to see how these pupils assimilated into the school environment with such ease. It was hoped that lessons could be learnt from their success and used in other situations.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach

This study basically employed a qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis. This is because this approach could bring to light the prevailing practices, attitudes and beliefs held by the school in their teaching of English as a second language and the pupils' progress and concurrent language ability. According to Gay, (2003), *"….qualitative research is conducted to promote greater understanding of not just the way things are, but also why*." Gay described this technique in data collection as the 'multi-method' approach. In terms of the method used it is more of an ethnographic case study as it "*involves learning about, understanding, or describing a group of interacting people*." (Neuman, 1998). This is the approach that the researchers adopted in this study.

In line with this multi-method approach, all the data collected was a reflection of the essences of people, objects and situations (Berg, 1989). This is what Miles and Huberman (1994) described as the 'raw' experience, which is recorded and then translated into words. These words that were documented were based on the observations, interviews and documents collected by the researchers during the course of the research or as Wolcott (1992) put, it was a process of *watching, asking, or examining*. Qualitative data essentially focus on '*naturally occurring ordinary events in natural settings*' (Miles and Huberman, 1994) thus giving the researchers a feel of the 'real life' situation that the pupils and teachers went through daily.

Sample and sampling

"*The purpose of selecting a sample is to represent a population about which we seek some information*" (Gay and Airasian, 2003). The process of selecting a sample to represent a larger group or population would depend on the aim of the research being carried out. The nature, size and method of selecting these samples will vary according to the research aim. This research used a small group of five and six year old pupils with little or no knowledge of the English language who have subsequently been put into the ESL programme. Our aim was to trail and trace, document, identify and comprehend the factors related to ease of acquisition of the English language among this group of pupils as a sample representing a larger group of ESL learners in Uplands.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Data were gathered through non-participant observations, Unstructured interviews, relevant documents, students' portfolios, field notes and biographical details. As for data analysis the researchers had chosen to use Miles and Huberman's (1994) general view of qualitative analysis. They defined analysis as "*consisting of 3 concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification*." However, the researchers also found it useful to incorporate Merriam's (1998) proposal on data analysis which stated that every qualitative research was required to have as part of it, a field data analysis done in conjunction with

data collection. This simply meant that the field analysis was done not at the end of the study but carried out concurrently with data collection.

The findings were then interpreted based on Patton (1990) who recommended that *"interpretation involves explaining the findings, answering 'why' questions, attaching significance to particular results and putting patterns into an analytic framework."*

Reliability and validity issues are often the crux of data gathered and findings established in any study. Neuman maintained that in qualitative research, reliability would simply mean 'dependability' or 'consistency'. This is because social theories and hypotheses are often "*ambiguous and not directly observable*" (Neuman, 1998). As the data in this study were gathered from various sources such as observations, interviews and document studies, extreme care was taken to ensure their dependability through inter and intra technique triangulation. For example only valid and legitimate documents were gathered and only relevant and appropriate people directly related to the study were interviewed and data from both sources were triangulated.

Validity on the other hand, would suggest 'truthfulness'. It also referred to "*how well an idea about reality 'fits' with actual reality*" (Neuman, 1998). According to him in qualitative study it is more about authenticity than validity. Authenticity mean, "*giving a fair, honest and balanced account of social life from the point of view of someone who lives it everyday*" (Neuman, 1998). Through the techniques of observations and interviews, we had documented as closely as possible the real life accounts of the happenings in the lives of the subjects being studied. This was done through observing the participants involved in their natural setting for a period of time in order to keep a close account of the participants' everyday experiences. All in all the researches attempted to overcome problems concerning the quality, the trustworthiness and authenticity of the findings as much as possible to make the research acceptable and plausible to the real world.

Findings

The analytical framework which was used to examine data gathered from the linguistic environment of the subjects of this research study constituted the parameters of **context, learners, teachers** and **curriculum.** These four parameters are held to be significant and operative in the learning environment. As such interpretations involving the explanation of findings will be presented within the framework of the aforementioned parameters.

The context

In this research study the *school* itself provided the milieu in which the language learning experience took place. Issues of governance are also part of the milieu as they are viewed as factors which aid in controlling the learning experience. In terms of governance, all subjects in this school (apart from foreign languages) are taught in English and all co- curricular activities too are conducted in English. The school uses the 'immersion classroom' approach where classes of second language (L2) learners are taught through the medium of L2. Interaction in both language and subject lessons focused largely on meaning where a three-phase discourse consisting of exchanges in which the teacher *initiates*, the pupil *responds* and the teacher gives *feedback,* predominated (Table 1).
As teaching was mainly learner centered with opportunity for negotiation of meaning outside the classroom, the **context of learning** bore strong resemblance to natural settings. This was further reinforced by a host of co-curricular activities to encourage the pupils to acquire and practice the language informally. These activities included annual class assemblies whereby each class was

Table 1. Getting to Know Sue

Sue	:	*Hello, I am Sue... I come from Germany. I have no 'bruder', no sister….*
Teacher	:	*No 'bruder', you mean brother? Boy?*
Sue	:	*Ya….brother*
Teacher	:	*And no sister.*
Sue	:	*Ya…no sister*
Teacher	:	*How old are you, Sue?*
Sue	:	*I am 5 year old* (looking around). *I like to play with my friend and I go to she house.*
Teacher	:	*Oh, you like to go to <u>her</u>* (emphasizing the word 'her') *house.*
Sue	:	*Ya!*
Teacher	:	*What else do you like to do?*
Sue	:	*Err….I don't know how to say. I sit.*
Teacher	:	*Alright! Very good, Sue. Thank you. OK, you may sit.*

Picture 1. A pupil reciting a poem.

given a chance to put up a performance in the form of a play, musical or any other form of presentation they chose in front of an audience. It served to promote confidence in spoken English amongst the pupils, particularly those just exposed to the language. Participation in oratorical contests and poem recitations further exposed them to the different genres of the English language. The school also conducted other activities such as 'Book Week' activities every year where teachers and pupils were involved in a host of activities related to books for the whole week (Picture 1).

The Learners

In order to understand the issues more deeply 5 pupils were chosen as subjects to gather more in-depth information. The information was gathered through interviews with the subjects, their parents and teachers. The names of the subjects have been changed in order to protect their identities. The subjects' particulars are summarized in Table 2.

Subjects' English language ability at point of entry

All the subjects involved in the study either have very minimal ability or no English at all at the point of entry. All of them were given an 'Early Year Assessment' by the ESL teacher to determine their ability and the results of the test showed that they all belonged to the same ability group, which was the Beginners' Group. This essentially meant that the subjects did not have any skills in reading, writing and even speaking in the language. Table 3 summarizes the subjects' ability at the point of entry.

Table 3 shows that all of the subjects have very limited speaking

ability in English. They have very limited English vocabulary as evident in their inability to describe the pictures, which they had drawn. None of them was able to identify all the ten pictures shown to them. The subjects too were unable to recognize all the 25 words given to them in the test but could identify an average of 5 words each. However, all of them were able to recognize almost all of the letters of the alphabet and most of the numbers from 1 - 20.

The researchers also attempted to measure the subjects' L2 (second language) acquisition by interviewing them over a period of 5 months in order to identify the subjects' oral language development in terms of their vocabulary acquisition, use of correct grammar, pronunciation and accent. The researchers too had observed the subjects' English language development in and outside of the classroom and analyzed both written assignments and assessments in their attempt to describe the subjects' language acquisition process.

Subjects' attitudes and responses in class

All the subjects seemed to enjoy the activities in the class. There was a tremendous amount of enthusiasm in the classroom and the subjects did every activity with much zest. All the subjects displayed much confidence in sharing their thoughts and ideas and were not afraid to use English even though they were not at all proficient at the beginning. The researchers also observed that there was no attempt by the learners to ridicule each other when someone made a mistake in using the language (Figure 1).

The subjects also took their written assignments seriously and tried very hard to complete their work on time. They seemed to be competing with each other as to who would complete the assignment first. There was healthy competition going on amongst the subjects. They appreciated the relaxed nature of the lessons and the support and encouragement of the teacher. None of the subjects felt disturbed or embarrassed by the one-to-one assessment done on their work although this was the time when the teacher pointed out their mistakes to them and there were many especially at the beginning.

Subjects' interaction outside of classroom

It was also crucial for the researchers to observe the young learners interaction with other students outside the classroom and how they used English to communicate in these situations. At the beginning

Table 2. The subjects' bio data and language background.

| Subject	Bio data	Language Background
Kay	5- year old girl, originated from Argentina and has one baby brother. Both her parents are from Argentina. She has been living in Kota Bharu for 6 months before settling in Penang.	Speaks only Spanish at home as both her parents speak minimal English. She had minimal exposure to English and had never attended any school before but could use and understand a few simple English words like 'go', 'like', 'see'.
Sue	5-year old girl of German descent. Lived in Germany all her life and has never lived any where else before coming to Penang. She is an only child.	Speaks only German at home. Both her parents speak minimal English and she had minimal exposure to English before coming to school. Like Kay, Sue could use a few simple English words when she needed to communicate.
Jen	Jen is a 5-year old girl who came from Thailand. She is of mixed parentage; her mother is Thai and her father is English. Jen is also an only child.	Jen speaks mainly Thai at home. Although her father is English, she does not spend much time with him as compared to her mum as such she is more fluent in the Thai language.
Jack	Jack is a 5-year old Dane and was born in Denmark. Both his parents are Danes. He has one younger brother who also attends the same school.	Jack speaks Danish at home. Both his parents speak limited English. He was never exposed to English before coming to the school. He possesses a very limited English vocabulary and speaks with a distinct Danish accent.
Eddie	Eddie is six years old. He is a Filipino and the youngest of three children. Eddie lives with his auntie in Penang as both his parents are working in the Philippines.	Eddie speaks mainly Tagalog at home. Although his parents know English, they prefer to speak their mother-tongue at home. Eddie has minimal English ability but manages to use and understand simple English words.
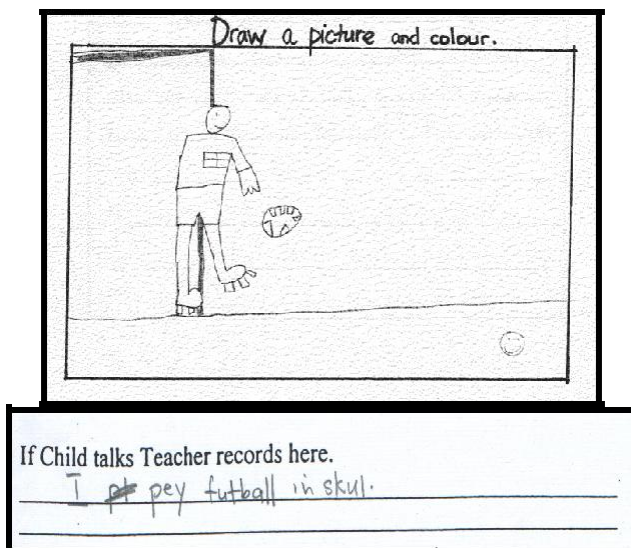
Figure 1. A picture description by a subject.

of their school experience during 'break time (a 20 min break in the morning and a lunch break which lasted an hour) the subjects hardly interacted among themselves mainly due to the lack of a common lingua-franca. Given the environment in the school, there was a strong need for the subjects to communicate in English as there was no provision for the use of any other languages in the school. This was the school's way of expediting the pupils use of the language to allow them to blend into the system. A few weeks later the subjects started to play and mingle with their schoolmates even though they were communicating in 'broken English' and using body language to overcome miscommunication. What was also amazing was the fact that the older pupils, who were by then more fluent in English, seemed to understand the communication and in fact 'spoke down' to these young learners. They tried to speak in short sentences, normally omitting articles, stressing the words they wanted to emphasize and repeating these words over and over again so that the subjects could understand them. The following is an example of what the researchers saw and heard during one of the 'break' sessions when Kay was playing with the other pupils who were English speakers (Table 4).

Subjects' language ability after six months

It became apparent to the researchers that these young learners had acquired all the skills outlined in the syllabus after six months in the school. They were able to:

Recognize familiar isolated words.
Participate in shared stories, songs, and games.
  Demonstrate understanding of meaning e.g. nodding or shaking head.
  Respond appropriately to familiar formulae, e.g. "How are you?"
  Show a personal response to a text through role-play , picture or

Table 3. Table of subjects' English language ability at the point of entry.

Subject	Speaking (picture description)	Reading / Phonics	Writing
KAY	Very limited oral vocabulary; could not describe the picture she drew, could identify only 4 out of the 10 drawings; was not able to describe the picture she drew well; used mainly gestures, pauses and words from her mother-tongue.	Very limited ability, could not recognize most of the 25 words shown to her but could read 'can', 'cat', 'go' and 'mum'. Could recognize most of the alphabets except for 'd', 'b', 'e', 'v', 'x' and 'w'. Could only match 'b', 'c', 's' with the pictures.	Was not able to spell any of the words she used to describe the picture.
SUE	Very limited vocabulary but was slightly better than Kay as she was able to use a few simple English words like 'friends', 'no brother' and 'no sister' to describe her family members. Managed to identify only 5 of the given drawings.	Had limited reading ability. Did not manage to recognize most of the words shown to her but could recognize 'a', 'I', 'my', 'no' and 'to'. Like Kay, she was able to recognize the letters of the alphabet except for 'd', 'b', 'g', 'y' and 'x' and ten numbers out of 20. Could match 'b', 'c', 's' with the pictures.	Was not able to spell any English word correctly.
JACK	Very limited English vocabulary; not able to describe the picture he drew and could identify only 4 of the drawings. Like the other 2 subjects, he used mainly gestures and body language.	Was able to recognize 4 words out of 25;'can', 'go', 'yes' and 'mum'. Could recognize all the letters except 'b', 'g', 'h', 'm', 'v' and 'x' and knew all the numbers except '14', '17' and '11'. Could match 'b', 'c', 's' with the pictures.	Could not spell any English word correctly.
JEN	Very limited vocabulary; not able to describe the picture she drew and could identify only 5 drawings on the test paper; but was able to use words like 'enjoy' to describe how she felt while playing with her friends and 'dancing' to describe her hobby.	Was able to recognize 'a', 'I', 'go', 'mum', 'no', 'to' and 'y'. Could match 'b', 'c', 's' with the pictures. She could also recognize all the letters except 'f', 'g', 'v' and 'x'. She knew 8 out of the 20 numbers.	Could spell 'mummy', 'daddy', 'I' and 'go'.
EDDIE	Very limited vocabulary, but was slightly better than the other four subjects. Was able to use words like 'enjoy' to describe how he felt at a friend's party, 'shopping' to describe his hobby, 'brothers', 'sisters' to describe his family members. He managed to identify 5 drawings on the test paper.	Was able to recognize 'mum', 'ball', 'big', 'no', 'go', 'to', 'yes', 'I', 'cat'. He could also recognize all the letters except 'g' and 'x' and knew 13 out of the 20 numbers. Could only match 'b', 'c', 's' with the pictures.	Could spell 'mum', 'dad', 'go', 'like'.

written work.
Join in shared reading activities.
 Follow simple instructions or directions supported by
 gesture. Recognize common words or phrases.
Relate letters to the sounds they make.
Recognize and name all letters of the alphabet.
 Communicate ideas, events and experiences through drawings,
 copied writing or attempts at own writing.
Talk about own drawing or writing

The researchers had conducted interviews with the subjects at the beginning of the school term, in the third month of the term and at the end of the six month period. The teacher also gave oral tests at different stages of the term. What was interesting was that these skills were acquired within the first six months of the year instead of the two-year period that was projected for the Primary Beginner Course.

Speaking

The first interview with the subjects confirmed their low proficiency level in English as at least four out of five of the subjects were not able to make much communication with the researchers apart from giving 'yes' or 'no' answers and using a lot of body language in their attempt to communicate their ideas. The subjects were also rather shy and reserved at this time which was understandable at this tender age and the unfamiliar environment they were in.
On the other hand, the second set of interviews revealed a much more confident group of pupils who were not afraid to try the language but had not yet acquired much vocabulary to be able to communicate effectively. They had managed, at this point, to use an average of four English words in a single sentence although their ability to use the appropriate tenses and verbs was still weak. In the last oral test given by the teacher, a marked improvement was seen in their responses. Four out of the five subjects were able

Table 4. Hide and Seek with Kay

Kay	:	*We hide….you look*
Pupil 2	:	*No! It's your turn now to look….you already hide just now.*
Kay	:	*I look? Ok…but cannot go there there. Must only here* (circling her arm around her).
Pupil 3	:	*Yeah….you go far just now. We never go far. Cannot go beyond the badminton court ok?*
Kay	:	*OK... I count now* (covering her eyes*). One, two, thre… .*

Table 5. My Friends in Uplands

Teacher	:	*Hi, good morning, Jack.*
Jack	:	*Good morning, Mrs Rokiah.*
Teacher	:	*How are you this morning?*
Jack	:	*Fine.*
Teacher	:	*Have you made many friends in Uplands?*
Jack	:	*Yes, I have many friends. They are all in my class, Year 1L. I know Ronja, Agos, David, Joseph and many many more. We always playlunch break and go to each other house. I go ….went to Joseph's house yesterday.*
Teacher	:	*I see. What about games? What kind of games do you like to play?*
Jack	:	*Games……er….I like to play play station, game boy, football, basket ball. I like many games.*
Teacher	:	*What do you normally do during the school holidays, Jack?*
Jack	:	*Mmm….I sleep…mm….I…go out with my mom and dad.*

to give lengthy answers to the seven questions posed to them while one of them answered adequately enough for the researchers to understand what was being said. Despite the inconsistencies in their use of tenses, the subjects still managed to communicate their messages and ideas across to the researchers effectively. They also showed a better understanding of what was being asked thus enabling them to respond appropriately. None of the subjects displayed any form of apprehension to speak in English although they were still making some grammatical errors when they spoke. Below is a sample of the interaction between the teacher and Jack (Table 5).

Reading

As for their reading ability, all the subjects had managed to develop a sight vocabulary suggested under the syllabus after six months. They had also developed the ability to use their phonetic skills in 'sounding out' the words they were attempting to read. The analysis of the Mid- Year Assessment showed that all of the subjects managed to recognize an average of 23 out of 30 words and had managed to pronounce these words accurately. They also seemed to understand the concept of punctuation as they were able to pause and stop at the appropriate places when made to read a short text aloud. Their comprehension at the literal level was good (Figure 1).

Writing

The subjects initially started writing by responding to a given picture (with some key words given) through writing a shared story. Later they were asked to write individually and were encouraged to write in whatever way they were comfortable with. They were and not forced to write in any particular way and as long as the subjects showed an attemp t at conventional writing the teacher rewarded

them with praises and encouragement and a 'star' on their written task. This went on for about two months after which they were taken to another stage where the student dictated their stories while the teacher acted as scribe. Here the teacher used the computer so that the other pupils would be able to view what was being written on the computer monitor's screen. The subjects would then read the story back to the teacher. In this way, the subjects would take note of the spelling of certain words and the conventions of writing like paragraphing and simple punctuation without having to go through the strain of writing the stories themselves.

By the fourth month, the subjects had internalized the system of writing in paragraphs, punctuating the beginning of the sentence with an upper case letter, and putting a full-stop at the end of a sentence. This they acquired through the various group writing sessions where they wrote stories together, sharing ideas and figuring out the conventions of writing. Although the spelling of many words was not accurate, the teacher did not seem too eager to point out their errors yet as she wanted to concentrate only on the rudiments of writing (Figure 2).

The ESL teacher

There were two ESL teachers in the primary school section. One teacher taught ESL students who had been at the school for a few years but still needed some help with their English. These students attending for example, Year 8 ESL were put together with Year 6 ESL students. The other ESL teacher would be responsible for the complete beginner's class for children with little or no understanding of English. This class might include students from Years 1 to 6. In this class pupils had daily ESL lessons with the teacher and the class size was small (ten pupils). This particular teacher has more than thirteen years of experience teaching ESL classes in this school. She had taught the beginners as well as the intermediate levels throughout her teaching career in the school. She graduated from the University of Nevada-Reno, in the United States majoring
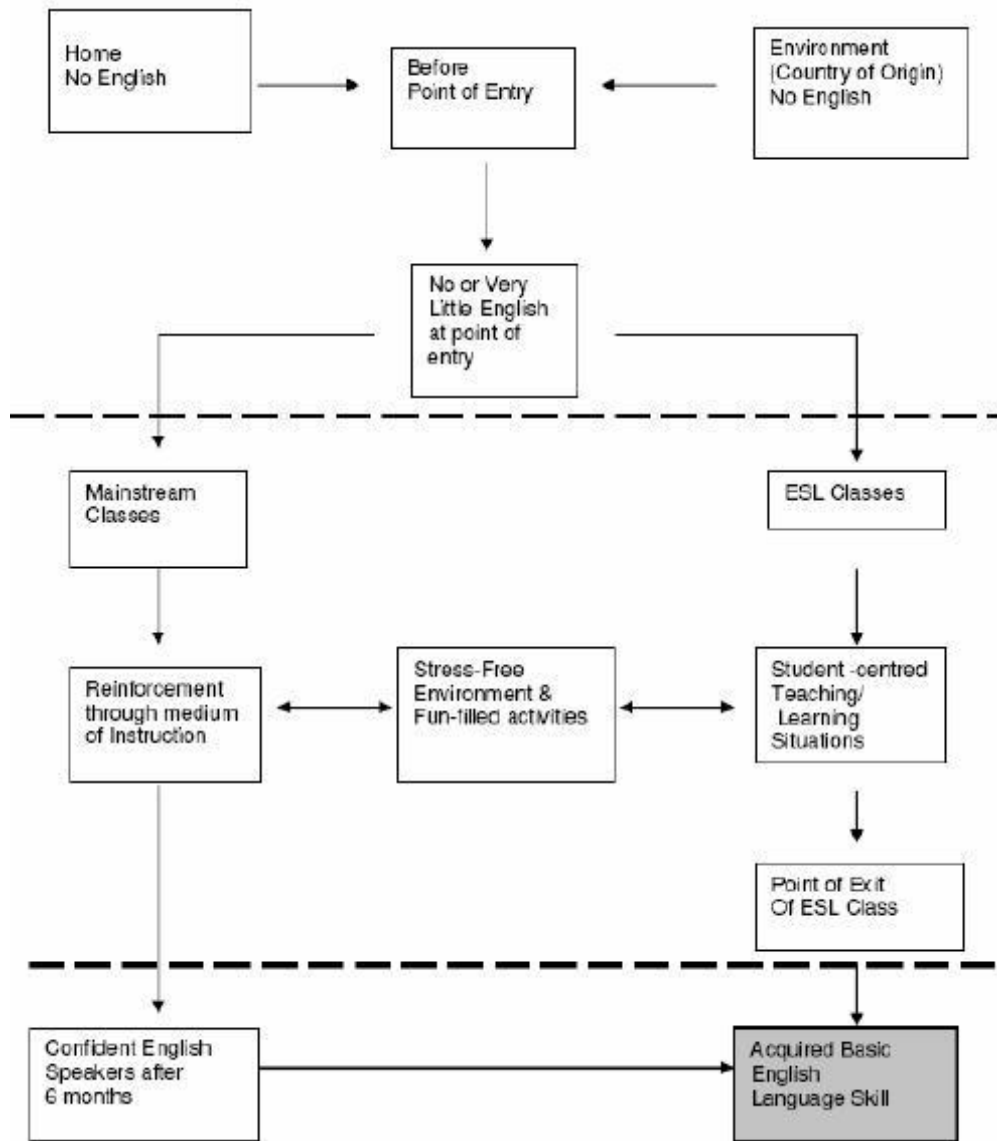
Figure 1. The Structure of success.

1. "There were two rulers and a pencil next to the book."
2. "There is a white rabbit next to the boy."
3. "The toy train is outside the box."
4. "The girl is carrying her bag."
5. "There are three cups on the table."
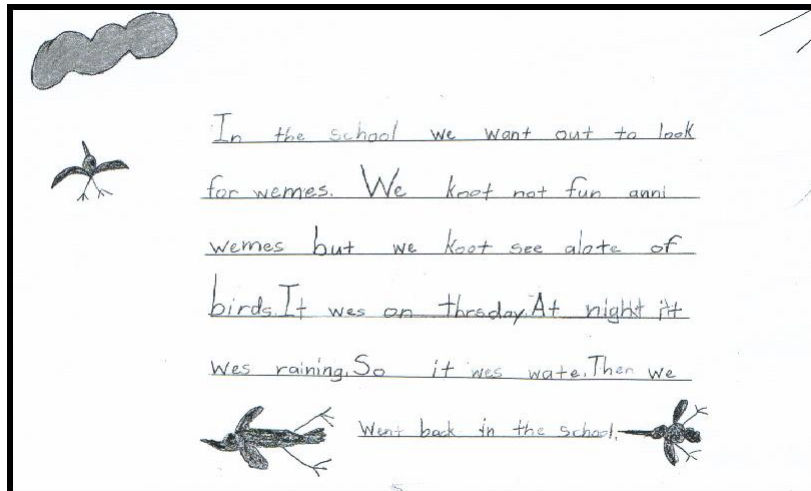
Figure 1. Test of literal comprehension.

Figure **2.** Subjects' written work.

in Linguistics and with ESL as her minor.

> *". …punishment is so outdated and irrational. no teacher in their right mind will want to do that unless they want their students to fail."*

(When asked for type of punishment given for mistakes made)

The teacher planned her lessons weekly using the scheme of work provided by the ESL department as a guide. However she was not compelled to follow it too closely. It was not the policy of the school administration to demand that teachers adhered strictly to the school scheme of work. In short, she was given the liberty to determine what she felt the pupils needed. Her main concern was to make sure that her pupils were able to understand and follow a particular lesson well before moving on to the next activity laid out in the scheme of work. In this way, she would be able to identify the weaknesses of each of her pupils and do the necessary reinforcement and remediation before moving on.

> *" I really enjoy teaching them. They're very spontaneous and lively… it's really a joy to teach a confident bunch of kids. They're always curious to learn new things and always asking questions. Sometimes I get tired just trying to answer them."*

(When asked for opinion of the pupils)

Lesson plans

The teacher planned her lessons based on the suggested syllabus and scheme of work. However, owing to the varied background of her pupils and the unpredictable outcome of each lesson, the teacher kept her lesson plans flexible. She used her own discretion in planning and carrying out her lessons according to the needs of her pupils who were the subjects of this study. She found this useful as it allowed the subjects to internalize the lessons taught at their own pace in order to ensure that they had understood a certain lesson before moving on to the next planned activity.

The teacher was provided with a variety of workbooks and activi-ty books for the pupils. She was also given the liberty to source other materials available in the department's 'resource cen-tre' or

use materials that she might have gathered from other sources. The teacher then made her own choices as to what resource material she wanted to use for a particular lesson. The lesson plans also did not show any particular preference in teaching style but rather the employment of various modes of instruction that served different purposes in her lessons.

Teaching style

The teacher did not seem to favour any particular teaching style as she employed various methodologies which ranged from group work activities to role playing and acting in presenting her lessons. However, there seemed to be a generic sequence of instruction that the teacher often used. Essentially, the teaching process was as follows:

a. Teacher encouraged input from subjects.
b. Teacher introduced a new concept to the subjects.
c. Teacher explained the new concept by giving examples through a song, story or even a game.
d. This followed by group work, role-play or classroom discus-sion on the topic being taught.
e. Pupils did a set task either; written, drawn, spoken or acted out. f. Teacher gave feedback on subjects' responses

In summary teachers in this school assisted language learners by:

a. ensuring that the learning environment was one in which students felt supported and valued and where they were able to take risks and make mistakes in their learning
b. helping them to make use of their existing knowledge of the world in their learning
c. providing them with plenty of non-verbal information to accompany what was provided through language
d. providing them with abundant opportunities to use the new language they were learning in situations where there was genuine need to communicate
e. helping them to make use of their existing knowledge of the world in their learning.
f. providing them with plenty of non-verbal information to accom-pany what was provided through language.
g. providing them with abundant opportunities to use the new language they were learning in situations where there was ge-

Table 6. Kay's English

Teacher	:	*Kay has shown much interest in the language and is doing very well in class.*
Parent	:	*Oh good! She always try to speak English at home, too.*
Teacher	:	*She has progressed quite well so far. She is not afraid to speak in English although she knows she is making mistakes, she still tries.*
Parent	:	*(Laughing) She is not a shy girl.*
Teacher	:	*(Laughing) No, she is not shy to try new things that are good for her. She will learn very fast this way. She can understand instructions well and as you can see here (showing Kay's workbook) she is able to recognize many words already. As a beginner this is already very good progress. I don't think you will have to worry too much about her progress but if you want her to progress faster, she needs to speak the language more often at home.*
Parent	:	*Yes, we try to speak to her in English and let her watch English programmes on t.v. Do you think she needs a tutor?*
Teacher	:	*Well, it's actually up to you but I think she should be able to progress well enough in school. Let's not take the fun out of learning the language. She would probably feel stressed with extra lessons at home.*

nuine need to communicate

h. equipping themselves with the latest pedagogy in teaching the language

i. being a proficient speaker of the language they were teaching (Table 6)

Correction and feedback

In evaluating her pupils work, the teacher resorted to several modes of evaluation. Firstly, all the written tasks done in the pupils' workbook were checked thoroughly. She would identify errors and correct them. In class she would go through the errors with the pupils and showed them the errors and how they were to be corrected. Secondly, the teacher would elicit oral responses from the subjects to evaluate their understanding of a certain lesson and check for any misunderstandings. Thirdly, in group work activities, the teacher would check the finished product completed by the group thoroughly before going through the work with the rest of the class. The pupils would then be given some time to produce a corrected version of their work before handing it in to be rechecked. Fourthly, the teacher would also devise simple tests to check on the subjects' ability to recall lessons taught. She would then ask for responses and check for errors immediately. Lastly, the teacher administered periodic assessments to evaluate the progress made by individual pupil. This was what one of the pupils said:

> " *I'm not afraid to speak English. We always laugh in class and enjoy. Mrs. Rokiah is very nice to us.*"

These assessments were not meant just to identify weaknesses and problems faced by individual pupils but also to chart the pr-gress made at certain stages of their language development. The teacher would then be able to gauge the level at which the pupils were at a given period of time. The teacher used a number of symbols to indicate a job well done by the pupils. Imprinted 'happy faces', stars, 'house points' and short phrases like 'good', 'well done', 'you're a winner' and many more words of encouragement were seen throughout the pupils' assignments. The pupils seemed very eager to receive the books from the teacher to see what kind of feedback they would get from the teacher. It seemed to spur them to do a better job in their next written task.

Curriculum

The ESL programme for beginner learners was firstly aimed at helping pupils gain confidence in speaking and listening and later to develop reading and writing skills. Educational videos such as 'Muzzy In Gondoland' and 'Muzzy Comes Back' were used for these students but contain very little English. These videos taught vocabulary such as greetings, parts of the body, food, and colours. Lessons for this group were made as simple and rewarding as possible and once the beginners had some knowledge of English, written work and reading of simple passages were introduced. As soon as the students had developed a certain level of vocabulary, English was taught via the communicative approach in all the language skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening). All the four language skills were given equal importance and weighting in the scheme of work.

Grammar was not taught in isolation. It was taught as part of writing so students could see how English grammar works. Pupils were expected to learn grammar 'unconsciously' instead of being drilled on the rules of the English grammar. The syllabus allowed the ESL teacher to use multiple textbooks and workbooks for her lessons. She was also supplied with a number of other resources for teaching purposes such as charts and audio-visual aids. The texts included 'Primary English Pupil's Book' and Workbook, 'Starters', 'Movers', 'Flyers' and 'The Jacaranda Series'. The books that were made available to the ESL teacher included those that had been imported from the United Kingdom, Australia and Brunei.

Teachers who have pupils admitted into their mainstream classes with no or limited English would normally administer a simple written and oral assessment for these pupils to determine their level of competency before referring them to the ESL teacher. After the pupils have been referred to the ESL teacher, the ESL teacher would again administer another simple written and oral test to determine these pupils ability, thus allowing her to place them in the appropriate groups. The pupils would be divided into beginners, intermediate, and advanced groups and they would then be given different time slots for their ESL lessons. The ESL programme made use of the 'withdrawal' method whereby ESL pupils were 'withdrawn' from their mainstream lessons for one period each day and a two period lesson at least once a week to attend ESL classes. It was the duty of the class teacher and the ESL teacher to determine the best time for the pupils to be withdrawn from their mainstream lessons.

Resources, evaluation and activities

The instructional facilities made available to the ESL teacher included a desk-top computer, a compact disc and audio-tape player, a television set and video player in the 'Activity Room'. Sometimes she would screen the educational videos but often she used the computer for any CALL (Computer Assisted Learning) materials. Other teaching materials included a variety of storybooks, workbooks, activity books and flashcards, among others.

The activities conducted in the classroom varied from lesson to lesson. They included singing, role-playing, 'show-and tell' sessions, miming, craftwork, CALL as well as watching video sessions. Reading and writing were also a big part of the classroom activities. Informal evaluation was done almost everyday in the classroom. The ESL teacher did this every time she checked the subjects' written exercises and oral responses in class and she made sure that the pupils were made aware of the mistakes that they made. She would check the subjects' written work in the classroom with them and would call them up individually to correct their mistakes. She did this after every lesson and made sure that she corrected them in a very subtle manner so as not to avoid embarrassing the pupils. As for formal evaluation two major assessments were carried out. The first assessment was the 'Early Years Assessment' and this was given at the beginning of the term. The other assessment was held at the end of the sixth month. This was the 'Mid- Year Assessment' in which the pupils were tested on all the language skills namely; writing, listening, speaking and reading. The other tests were held in the third month of the term mainly a short 'word recognition' test together with an oral test where the pupils had to describe a given picture. A spelling test was given in the beginning of month 6 before the last mid-year assessment was held (Table 7).

Numerous activities were carried out by the teachers especially the ESL teacher. An example of one of these activities was the 'Book Week' programme where all the teachers and students in the school took part in various activities related to reading and story books. Teachers read stories to students throughout this week and introduced them to famous authors and well-known stories and literature. Students took part in poem recitations and book quizzes and older students were encouraged to read to the younger ones as well. The whole programme culminated in an interesting day for all when both teachers and students dressed up in their favourite book characters. Students were also given awards at the end of the week for having read the most books and taken part in the activities carried out.

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

English language is a medium of instruction in this school and is used across the school curriculum. Both ESL teachers as well as mainstream subject teachers work hand in hand to maximize the students' experience in using the language. In the mainstream classes ESL pupils were well 'absorbed' into the classes and were not segregated from the rest of the English-speaking pupils in any way. The teachers made their lessons as simple to understand as possible by making use of the techniques that were suitable for the ability and needs of their pupils. In many ways the pupils were not really leaning English but acquiring knowledge. This is similar to what Krashen (1982) termed as 'acquisition', an unconscious process similar to the way a child develops her first language competency. Therefore, the child is not aware that she is acquiring the language while she is doing so.

Brainstorming before introducing a new topic also helped the ESL pupils to make sense of the lesson taught. The pupils were also put in 'support groups' where an ESL pupil was put in a group of English-speaking pupils so that he or she could get assistance from their fellow classmates. The teachers also made it a point to check on the ESL pupils individually to make sure if they had understood the topic being taught. The collaboration between the ESL and mainstream teachers was crucial (Erb and Doda, 1989) in order to maximize the ESL pupils' learning experience. The mainstream teachers helped to further enhance language learning by assuring the students in their care that they were not outsiders but part of the class. They also provided support by minimizing stress, making the environment safe and comfortable for the second language learners. On the other hand ESL teachers who received feedback from the mainstream teachers provided the necessary support for learners with special language needs. This symbiotic relationship of teachers worked well in providing a supportive learning environment.

The school environment as well as the amount of appropriate support by the school was clearly critical. The school's policy of 'immersing' the students in an all round English environment created a need among the students to learn the language as quickly (Carroll, 1967; Stern, 1985) as possible in order to be accepted in the school system. This indirectly motivated the students to take the learning of English seriously and try to achieve a level of competence at a faster pace. The immersion system also meant the absence of an easily available means of communication thus giving an additional motivating factor for the young students. The students learnt the language of the moment which they were exposed to. The language they heard and used was almost always directly relevant to objects and events in their immediate surroundings. Hence, even if the student did not (Cummins 1996; Thomas and Collier 1997) understand all the words, the context provided the meaning. This is perhaps similar to the program in Canada called the 'immersion' program which was first introduced in 1965 (Genesse, 1994) . The first programs were developed to provide students in Canada who were mainly English-speaking with opportunities to learn Canada's other official lan-guage, French. The success of this program saw it being adopted by other second language programs such as, Mohawk (Holobow, Genesee and Lambert, 1987) and Hebrew (Genesee and Lambert, 1983).

The students were learning English in an environment that was full of acceptance and emotional support. They were not fearful of making mistakes, looking foolish or 'failing'. They had been given the confidence that the adults around them would not admonish or make them look silly in their attempts in communicating in English. Teachers made all efforts to understand what the pupils tried to say regardless of how ungrammatical their English was. Student attitudes towards their English language development were also important and were influenced by

Table 7. Sample of mind-year assessment of three of the subjects.

Pupils	Oral section	Listening comprehension	Phonics section	Reading section	Writing section
Kay	Responded well to all the six questions; giving lengthy answers to the questions except for question one which she answered very briefly. Could use words like 'prefer','bored', 'sleepover', 'enjoy','relax'.	'Excellent', managed to match the correct pictures with all ten descriptions correctly.	Showed ability to use the beginning sounds in words. Also experimented with middle vowels and showed confidence in using consonant sounds.	Could read 26/30 'high frequency words' Read by pronouncing sounds and relating to reading experience.	Able to spell words according to sounds. Able to use the correct tense, 'was teaching' in a sentence to show grammatical awareness.
Sue	Responded well to 5 questions; but answered questions 1 & 3 briefly. Used words like 'of course', 'wonderful', 'enjoy'.	'Excellent'	Showed ability to use the beginning sounds in an attempt to spell the words.	Read 23/30 high frequency words. Managed to pronounce the first sounds.	Able to spell words using sounds.Good at beginning sounds but needed to work on the middle sounds.
Jack	Responded well to four questions; using varied vocabulary. Used words like 'excellent', 'lovely', 'skiing','sun-tan'.	'Excellent'	Could use the acquired sounds in spelling out words. Could spell by using beginning, middle and ending sounds.	Read 28/30 words. Managed to pronounce the sounds while trying to read.	Spelled words phonetically; some Danish features in words. E.g. 'ofor' for 'over' and 't' in 'sot'. But the sentences were quite fluently arranged.

their view of themselves as English users as well as teacher and peer expectations of success (Rooy and Verhoef 2000) in both the learning of English and learning generally. This finding is in congruent with the findings of Shrum and Glisan (1994) who found that acquisition of a second language is often facilitated by presents of; comprehensible input in the target language; opportunities for students to negotiate meaning in the target language; opportunities for students to interact communicatively with one another in the target language and; a non-threatening environment in the classroom. In Uplands the ESL pupils received from the mainstream teachers too. Pupils were not left alone but were helped by people around them who created the right conditions for learning.

This study also found out that activities organized, planned and implemented within the school curriculum helped to boost their language acquisition. The extra curricular activities and other school projects carried out helped to further enrich the pupils' understanding and grasp of the language. Liao (1996) also agreed that the content of what was studied and learned across the curriculum and

the teaching and learning methods and the extent to which they allowed all pupils to participate effectively in their own learning also contributed to the success.

Broadly speaking, findings from this research study imply that the success structure for accelerated acquisition of English by young ESL learners is premised on the importance of working with both feelings and intellect at the same time and in both group and individual learning which takes place in a vibrant and supportive linguistic environment.

Conclusion

The findings clearly revealed that English was not just taught as a subject alone to the ESL pupils in Uplands. The subjects were continuously exposed to the language most part of the day which was crucial in providing the necessary environment and opportunities for using the language in the subjects' everyday lives. In addition to this, the more structured ESL classes further helped to reinforce the learning of the language and provide the necessary interventions needed to rectify any mistakes

made by the subjects. The emphasis on all areas of writing, speaking, reading and spelling helped the pupils to master the language in a relatively shorter period time.

We strongly feel that the findings of this study are significant to institutions in Malaysia who are striving to promote the teaching and learning of the English language but are facing numerous stumbling blocks along the way. This is especially significant to the national schools that currently have to deal with the deteriorating English language results in the major national examinations. Uplands is not a national school but perhaps some of the findings of this study could help the policy makers design a different and hopefully and optimistically a better English Language Program for the national schools.

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