

## **Second Language Learning Inequality: A Malaysian File**

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The prestige and opportunities accompanying biligualism form the motivation for many Malaysian parents to provide their children with English education. English a second language undoubtedly still remains highly significant in the occupational domain. In Malaysia, English is almost a determinant in an individual's socioeconomic mobility or future. The persisting significance of English in the country causes bilingualism involving English to be viewed as an 'asset'.

For this reason, this paper discusses findings from a study which considers the issue of the importance of being bilingual in English and a mother tongue and attempts to describe the provision of opportunities to learn English for two groups of learners of English as a second language (ESL).

In order to describe the provision of opportunities to learn ESL a comparative study of two communities and their respective schools, one homogeneous and the other heterogeneous with a higher rate of bilingualism, seems appropriate. The homogeneous or heterogeneous nature of the schools and their community essentially reflects the contrasting school and community composition available in multilingual Malaysia. The study thus deals with two sets of participants and settings as illustrated by Figure 1 below:

community  
and School A:  
Homogeneous

community  
and School B:  
Heterogeneous

Figure 1

The study considers the interaction between the community and the school as a focal point for analysis. Such interaction is defined as the learning environment within which efforts to learn ESL are set. The interaction becomes the focal point for analysis for the reason that bilingualism within the Malaysian context is not promoted through a bilingual education programme. ESL is taught as a subject for one or two periods daily. Each period lasts between thirty five and forty minutes. Some children enter school with knowledge in English while others have their first formal encounter with the language in school. Some learn it well and ultimately are bilingual in the mother tongue and English while others learn merely to recognize the language as English.

With the language being taught as a subject for a period or two daily and in the students' own native culture in an environment where it is an accepted lingua franca used to a certain degree in higher education, government, court, and business, it is only appropriate to not preclude the role of other factor beyond the classroom as contributory to a high proficiency in the language where ever it occurs. The possibility of factors beyond the classroom having a role to play in language learning is in fact compatible with theories in second language acquisition (SLA) which have described language learning through sociolinguistic factors (e.g. Lambert 1967, Gardner and Lambert 1972, Lambert and Tucker 1972 and Schumann 1976). The social context is seen as important in second language acquisition since the social context, as has been shown by SLA studies, can either offer or limit opportunities to learn and acquire the second language.

Thus in order to see how the social context plays a role in the efforts to learn a second language in a Malaysian context, the study compares two communities and chooses the interaction between each community and its school as the element to be analyzed for describing the impact of the interaction on the provision of opportunities to learn ESL for the groups of subjects.

*The comparison and description are built upon the sociolinguistic perspective.* The study therefore attempts to include such aspects by taking a holistic approach through the investigation of the interaction between a community and its school and how this interaction affects opportunities to learn a second language. For the purpose of grasping a valid holistic view, an ethnographic style in data collection was employed. As Fox (1977:3) puts it, each society is best understood by studying it as a whole.

## Theoretical Framework

There have been studies which deal with the interaction between the linguistically and culturally diverse community and the school. The studies however generally offer a description for success or failure in schooling in general and do not focus on language learning in particular. Nevertheless, they provide some useful background information for investigating the interaction between a community and its school and how this interaction has an impact on language and learning.

Heath (1983), Philips (1982), Labov (1969 & 1970), and Bernstein (1971 & 1973) are some of the scholars who have investigated the relationship between the language, the school and the community and the effect of this relationship on learning or schooling in general. These researchers generally describe how both the school and the community react to each other based on the differences in their patterns of interactional behaviour and language.

Teacher expectations of and attitudes towards certain groups of learners formed on the basis of language differences have been proved to have an important part in pupils' achievement by work of Fairchild and Edward-Evans (1990) and Wilcox (1982). In America, teacher attitudes have been a matter of debate on the issue of teaching standard English to speaker of non-standard varieties. Fairchild and Edward-Evans (1990) regard teacher attitudes as being crucial for student achievement. Focussing their discussion on Black English vernacular, they point out that teacher expectations of a student's performance is communicated to the student in a way that affects the attitudes and consequent behaviour of the student. Thus, teachers who expect failure from certain groups demand less and provide less information, feedback and praise, therefore inducing failure. This in other words is a self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of the teacher who acts as the reinforcer of society's negative attitude towards Blacks and minorities who are judged mainly on their language differences.

In a comparative study of two west coast communities, one working class and the other professional class, Wilcox (1982) describes how teachers socialize children differentially for work role based on the teacher's perception of these roles and the social class of the children's parents. This, according to Wilcox (1982: 272), "*does not appear to happen intentionally or consciously, but rather virtually without plan or plot, in a series of actions woven throughout the fabric of day-to-day life in the classroom*".

While Fairchild and Edward-Evans, and Wilcox illustrate society's attitude and expectations that trigger somewhat unconscious differential treatment towards the smaller communities' social, language, and cultural differences that can in turn affect the childrens school performance, Douglas (1964), Hargreaves (1967) and Mehan (1991) show that blatant segregation of linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural minorities happens through teaching or streaming which is widely practised in schools. Douglas' (1964) study shows that streaming or ability has indirect effects which may operate through the influence it has on teacher and peer expectations for pupils from particular streams. Findings of Hargreaves' (1967) study confirm Douglas' findings by pointing out that students in the lower stream tend to develop an anti-social attitude or against the school values which is significantly influenced by the reaction of upper stream pupils and teacher towards them. Along the same line, Mehan (1991) states that streaming creates educational inequality particularly for students from the lower socioeconomic and linguistic minority backgrounds. Students in low-ability groups or general educational tracks do not receive the same quality or quantity of instruction as students in high-ability groups. This in turn can lower the self-esteem and aspirations of students in the low-ability group.

The studies discussed above illustrate how the smaller or minority groups are being brushed aside by the dominant society through interactions between minority children and the teacher and other children in the context of school. This study centers on the interaction between pupils from two different communities and other members of their schools. As the main aim of the study is to describe inequality in opportunities to learn English among the subjects, the research questions address the following:

1. What are the issues that influence the interaction between pupils from both communities and teachers and other pupils in the respective schools?
2. In what ways do these issues affect opportunities to learn English among the two groups of pupils.

#### Participants and Settings

The first set of participants and setting was a group of pupils from a lower socioeconomic background, the Taman Kenanga community, which was located in an area skirting the capital city. The community was populated by residents whose cosmopolitan lifestyle has often made sociologists refer to them as the urban villagers (Fox 1977). The population composition of the community was homogeneously Malay