

## **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

and most of them were monolingual in Bahasa Melayu. The school Sri Manis that the pupils attended was the only school in the community. The student population composition was highly similar to that of the community. The teacher composition in the school was more heterogeneous resembling the ethnic distribution of Malaysia with Malays forming the majority followed by the Chinese and Indians.

Six miles away from Taman Kenanga and Sri Manis was Taman Seri the other set of participants and setting of the study. Members of this community were for the most part, the middle class, the mainstream urbanites. There was a small number of those in the lower socioeconomic group residing in the low cost housing or flats in the estate. The population composition was heterogeneous and this was also the case with the school, Sri Mekar, chosen for the study.

### Methodology

The study took a qualitative approach in its data collection which was through participant observations and conversational interviews. The researcher assumed the role of a substitute or a relief teacher in both schools. Observations were carried out while the teacher was participating as a teacher. Interviews were informal with no prepared questions. Pupils were interviewed in small groups while teachers were interviewed individually. Participant observations and conversational interviews were also carried out in the communities where in the researcher participated in festivities and visits. The duration of data collection lasted for nine months.

### Discussion of Findings

For the purpose of discussing findings of the study, the research questions are recalled:

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?

The findings will hence be discussed with reference to the research questions.

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Seri Manis homogeneously Malay student body population implied a strong presence of Bahasa Melayu, the mother tongue for most of the students and the main language used in the community. The use of Bahasa Melayu, the medium of instruction, was observed in all classes irregardless of the subject matter, including English. The English lessons too seemed to suffer from the constant interference of the dominant Bahasa Melayu. The English teacher would be the only person using English during English lessons. Bahasa Melayu was used by the pupils to speak to all of the teachers irregardless of their ethnicity. The teachers too, including English teachers, would use *Bahasa Melayu in conversations with pupils in and outside of classroom*. Hence, the language pattern which was skewed to Bahasa Melayu was seen as one of *the issues that tended to limit opportunities to learn English as a second language* by pupils from the lower community attending Sri Manis. The English lessons were the only time that they could hear English, albeit scarcely, being used by the English teacher. The non-Malay teachers tended to use English when interacting among themselves in the staff rooms but often this was beyond the hearing distance of the students. Hence, this level of interaction involving English in Sri Manis was not a provision for opportunities to learn English among the pupils. It can therefore be concluded that the language patterns at various levels in Sri Manis i.e. the pupil-pupil, pupil-teacher, and teacher-teacher, did not offer opportunities for pupils from the lower community, Taman Kenanga, to learn English as a second language.

Clearly, the choice of Bahasa Melayu by the English teachers can be concluded as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As most English teachers in Sri Manis pointed out, lessons that went on for over ten minutes without explanation in Malay would trigger an uncontrollable classroom situation. Bahasa Melayu had to be used in disciplining or explaining or else the teachers' words would go unnoticed. The English teachers without any hesitation or remorse over their conflict of interests would use Bahasa Melayu when speaking with their students outside English lessons since most of the students, according to them, were not proficient in English. This assumption generally seemed to neglect the idea of providing opportunities for the students to learn the language beyond the classroom setting.

The community, Taman Kenanga, being generally populated by monolingual Malays and lacking in sophisticated amenities that could attract English-speaking establishments further deprived the pupils of opportunities to use English. Hence, the language patterns in Taman Kenanga too tended to limit their opportunities to learn English in the community. Bahasa Melayu was emphasized for the daily interaction among the members and between members and outsiders who visited the community.

The same tendency or treatment towards the lower community pupils among the teachers could be observed in the more cosmopolitan school, Sri Mekar in Taman Seri. Since Taman Seri consisted of a number of residents from the lower income group, Sri Mekar too had its fair share of students from this lower group. Like the Sri Manis pupils, pupils from the lower group in Sri Mekar tended to be deprived of opportunities to learn English effectively as the language patterns involving them in the school tended to be differentiated from the language patterns involving students from the upper group. The language patterns appeared to surface from the same assumption shared by English teachers at Sri Manis. A number of teachers, Malays as well as non-Malays, who were well versed in English, showed the inclination for Bahasa Melayu when interacting with the lower group pupils whose academic performance had forced them into the arts stream. Pupils in the arts streams in Sri Mekar had similar backgrounds with those in Sri Manis.

However, the pupils from the lower group in Sri Mekar had more direct exposure to English as they lived in a cosmopolitan community in which establishments functioning mostly using the English language were available. Fast-food joints such as 'Pizza Hut', 'Mc Donalds' and boutiques carrying international labels displayed signs in English and Malay and encouraged salespersons to use English. Hence, although their home environment seemed to lack resources and opportunities for them to learn English effectively, the community's setting was more equipped to provide a conducive environment for ESL learning. However, the lower group pupils did not appear too eager to seize such opportunities to use or learn English. As the lower group pupils claimed they would 'occasionally' use their limited English skills but they could often 'get away' with Bahasa Melayu in English-speaking establishments.

The upper group pupils in Sri Mekar whose academic performance had placed most of them in the science stream were inclined to use English when interacting among themselves. The science streamed classes generally consisted of upper group pupils from different ethnic groups who had been exposed to English as early as during infancy and the latest at the preschool level. English was the popular choice for most of the science streamed pupils.

English teachers as well as other teachers of different ethnic groups who were well-versed in English too tended to resort to English when interacting with pupils in the science stream. Clearly, the teachers' language preference for interaction with the upper group pupils only strengthened the opportunities that the pupils seemed to readily seize. This can therefore be pointed out as another case of self-fulfilling prophecy where the teachers' assumption that the upper group pupils who came from middle and

upper income groups tended to be more proficient in the language translated into the provision of more opportunities for the upper group pupils to learn English. Most of the teachers tended to equate those who could speak English in the school as coming from "good homes". As an English teacher put it, "You can easily tell that pupils in Form Four Bersih ('Clean'-each class was labelled according to some pleasant adjective) cannot speak English by their uniforms (i.e., tidy or untidy), behaviour and where they come from".

With regards to the first research question on the issues that influence the interaction between the pupils from both communities and teachers and other pupils in the respective schools, the findings seem to point to four issues which are the home language, the community's language, the patterns of interaction in school and the socioeconomic background. The language or languages used at home could determine the availability of opportunities to learn English or use English in school. Teachers in both schools, Sri Manis and Sri Mekar, tended to use Bahasa Melayu with pupils from the non-English speaking background. The Taman Kenanga community's preference for Bahasa Melayu did not offer opportunities for learning English for the lower group pupils. *The lack of English-speaking establishments in the community further denied ESL learning opportunities for the lower group pupils in Sri Manis.* Taman Seri, on the other hand, had English speaking establishments which set the opportunities for both upper and lower groups in Sri Mekar. However, the upper group pupils who were mostly in the science stream had greater opportunities to learn and use English as the teachers at Sri Mekar tended to use English with them. The inclination to use English among the teachers was triggered by the assumption that the upper group pupils generally came from an English-speaking background. Pupils' appearance and stream formed the determinants of pupils' socioeconomic background which in turn became the platform for the choice of English or Bahasa Melayu in the interactions in the context of school.

The different treatment received by the two groups of pupils in Sri Manis and Sri Mekar implies an inequality in opportunities to learn English. The home language, the community's language, the patterns of interaction of pupils in Sri Manis and the arts streamed pupils in Sri Mekar which did not include English seemed to discourage teachers from using English when interacting with them, hence, limiting opportunities for the pupils to learn English. The socioeconomic background of pupils was referred to for deciding on the language to be used in interactions in school. Teachers' hesitation to use English with pupils from the lower socioeconomic groups further minimized opportunities to learn English among pupils from the lower groups. Teachers' readiness to use English with the middle and upper socioeconomic group of



pupils in Sri Mekar extended the opportunities to learn and use English to these pupils. Such was the way in which the home language, the community's language the interaction patterns in school, and the socioeconomic background of the two different groups of pupils affected their opportunities to learn English.

The differences in terms of language between the school and the community or home as have been shown by Heath (1983), Philips (1982), Labov (1969 & 1970) and Bernstein (1971 & 1973), can cause the school to react in ways that can inhibit learning. The findings of this study show how the different home and community's language can limit opportunities to learn a second language. The findings of Fairchild and Edward-Evans (1990) and Wilcox (1982) are supported by findings from this study which point to teachers' attitudes and expectations of pupils from the lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers in this study, demanded less and provided less information on English through their compliance with the use of Bahasa Melayu with the lower group pupils. This did "... not appear to happen intentionally..." as Wilcox (1982: 272) asserts it.

Another fact implicated by the findings of this study is the socioeconomic dualism among the Malays that was transparent at the school level in Sri Mekar. There existed the middle or upper group Malays and the lower group Malays. The middle or upper group Malays received opportunities shared by other ethnic groups in the same socioeconomic background. They made up the mainstream population in Sri Mekar. The lower group continued to be denied the same opportunities and hence remained in the socioeconomic group they inherited from their forefathers. This vicious cycle appeared to be further aggravated by the streaming which formed the yardstick for teachers to predetermine pupils' proficiency in English.

The findings of this study hence also raise the issue of linguistic and socioeconomic segregation that is perpetrated by streaming brought forward by Douglas (1964), Hargreaves (1967), and Mehan (1991). The indirect effects of streaming, as shown in this study, operated through the influence it had on teachers and other pupils' expectations for the non-science streamed pupils who happened to be mostly from the lower socioeconomic group. The findings also identify two distinct groups of pupils, the conformists, i.e., the English-speaking science streamed pupils and the non-conformists, i.e., the non-English speaking arts streamed pupils. These two groups resemble the two sub-groups introduced in the work of Douglas (1964), Hargreaves (1967) and Mehan (1991). The additional feature found in the distinct groups in this study is the presence or absence of English proficiency. The process of an unequal provision of opportunities to learn ESL as found in the two schools in the study was not

an outcome of a well thought out plan, rather; it was an unintended network, built from the sociolinguistic peripherals, which outcome happened to be the fortune of one group and the misfortune of another.

### Conclusions

The 'story' of the poor becomes poorer illuminates this paper. It is a 'story' which ending can be reshaped if characters, with special reference to the teachers, are made aware of the ramifications of their interactive patterns with different groups of pupils. Less must not be made lesser. The lesser group which lacks opportunities to learn and use English at home and the community must be offered more opportunities to learn and use English within the school through the conscious efforts of the teachers and assistance of the more fortunate peers. Complying with the language preference of the lower groups can mean inequality in providing opportunities for learning a second language. Inequality in the provision of opportunities to learn which is viciously reinforced by streaming must be checked. Such finding of the study hence urgently calls for studies on the necessity of streaming within the Malaysian education system.

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