

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Danial (aged 7½) is playing the Playstation while his brother, Mikail (aged 4½), watches the game. Mikail picks up the cover of the game compact disc, looks at it and the following interaction ensues:

M: Formula One. *Abang*, I know how to spell Formula One. Eff (F). . .

Eye (I) . . . For. What is this, *Abang*? (Points to the prints on the cover with index finger).

D: (Gives a cursory glance). Eff (F).

M: Eff (F) . . . Eye (I) Fo . . .

D: No. That's Eff (F) One (1).

M: Eff (F) . . . One(1) . . . For . . . huh? (Brows furrowed).

D: No. This is Eff (F) One (1) two thousand and one (2001). (Points to all the prints with index finger).

M: Oooh. Eff One two thousand and one (F1 2001), *bukan* (not) Formula One. (Nods his head).

Fieldnotes (2002)

The conversation above displays a child's literacy development and his attempts at making meaning from the text. He is drawing upon his knowledge of his alphabet system and exposure to multiple text forms such as the image of a racecar as well as the words on the cover of the compact disc, and the Playstation game his brother is engaged in. This literacy event is taking place in the home and the child is drawing upon his experiences of watching the actual Formula One races on television with his family in the domain of the

home. He is trying to read the text and he knows that what he is spelling and what is printed are not the same. This literacy experience is mediated through the talk with his brother where his brother acts as a more able peer who assists him in his attempts at reading the text.

This qualitative case study explores the literacy practices of a young learner in the domains of the home and community. It develops an in-depth portrait of texts and literacy practices in these domains and the purposes these texts are used. Hence, this study intends to find out how young Malaysian children acquire and develop literacy in English through the reading and writing connection.

This chapter will provide a background of the study, discussing the social dimensions of literacy development and literacy in English for young learners in Malaysia in relation to the domains of the school, home and community as well as literacy development of young learners through the reading-writing connection. Then, it will include the statement of the problem, the research questions and finally the significant of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Literacy development is seen as emerging from children's oral language development and their attempts at reading and writing. Children learn to speak before they learn to read and write and what they know about and can do with talk will be a strong support of their learning to read and write (Godwin & Perkins, 1998).

From the perspective of many developmental theorists (e.g. Piaget, 1959; Vygotsky, 1962), early childhood is a transitional stage when children are learning the underlying skills that are necessary for the formal elementary grades. They are learning

how to make all their actions and cognitive behaviours more purposeful and deliberate as well as learning to construct an understanding of the natural and social world. It is important for educators in Malaysia to understand how young learners learn literacy especially in the English language considering the importance of English as a global language and a language of science and technology. Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Muhammad is advocating the need for improvement in the proficiency and competence of English among young Malaysians and the Ministry of Education will implement the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English in the year 2003 starting with Standard One, Form One and Lower Six. "If Malaysians want to participate actively in international life, they had better learn English seriously and as early as possible" (*New Sunday Times*, October 6, 2002, p. 10). Therefore, it is important for us to look at the circumstances in which literacy is acquired and maintained, in particular by learners of English as a second language.

Social Dimensions of Literacy Development

Literacy takes place in a social context where texts feature and where people use and talk about these texts. When viewing literacy as a social phenomenon (Christie & Misson, 1998), it is important to look at everyday literacy practices of the child. Literacy is not something that is artificial, that is schooled within the formal educational institution only, but it is something that is alive and well and takes place in our social context. The formal instructional environment as well as the home environment shape a child's literacy development.

In addition to the overt teaching that takes place in classrooms, children also acquire language through talk with others as well as through exposure to multiple text

forms in the media such as television, video compact discs (VCDs), movies, advertisements, computer games and a variety of print texts. These texts serve as springboards for the literacy development of young learners as they read and write in ways that are shaped by what they read. Children learn from other people; the experience of sharing texts written by others gives children an insight into the writing process. Talking about writing both as a reader and as a writer is important for children's developing understanding and knowledge about writing (Godwin & Perkins, 1998).

Literacy in English for Young Learners in Malaysia

In Malaysia, although we live in a multicultural and multilingual society, a significant portion of texts that surrounds us is in English. Literacy is tied in with daily activities and frequently combines various types of reading and writing. It draws upon spoken language, numeracy, and visual images (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Language and literacy are social events which not only require skills, knowledge and understanding, but also involve complex interactions and responses.

Due to its status as a second language, English is widely used in Malaysia in our daily lives; at home, in educational institutions, at the workplace, in business and banking, in the electronic and print media, in science and technology and the entertainment sector. When we switch on the television, we see shows, movies, news or advertisements in English; when we turn on the radio, we hear English songs on the air, radio disc jockeys (DJs) speaking in English as well as advertisements in English. Along the roads that we traverse everyday, we see banners, buntings, advertisements on billboards or big screen televisions and road signages and even names of shops or businesses in English. At home, all sorts of texts circulate in the household, from

newspapers, comics, books and magazines, labels on packages, catalogues, advertisements, mail – personal or official, instruction manuals to recipes. These are the current realities of literacy practices in English in Malaysia.

Besides the literacy practices and events at home and in the community, schools play an important role in the teaching and learning of the English language. Currently, English is taught as a subject and students spend approximately 200 minutes a week in the English language class. It is stated in both the *Sukatan Pelajaran Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah* (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001) and *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah* (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001) that the teaching of English is to enable learners to use English in everyday situations and work situations as well as to pursue higher education. However, due to discrepancies between what is taught and learnt in class with what is assessed during the examinations, teachers teach for the examinations instead of according to the aims and objectives of the English language curriculum. Because of this, there is public concern about children's development of competence and proficiency with regards to reading and writing in the English language.

Literacy Development of Young Learners through the Reading-Writing Connection

Many studies done on children's literacy have found that the "seeds of literacy" (Brodova, et al., p.1) are planted before children enter school. Children are able to successfully draw and represent symbolically what they have seen or watched, learned and heard. Even though they may not be able to read yet, they are still able to make meaning from picture books, television, movies, and other semiotic codes and various

resources of literacy practices around them. This “meaning making” is an important step in literacy development.

Reading and writing mean more than getting the words right; they are also about interpreting and making sense (Godwin & Perkins, 1998). Reading and writing also rely on cognitive skills such as attention, memory, symbolic thinking and self-regulation. Besides that, children also must develop an understanding of concepts that underlie the act of reading and writing before they actually learn how to read and write. In addition to concepts and skills that underlie reading and writing, they must also learn specific literacy skills, which would enable them to make sense of and interpret words.

The terms beginning reading and writing or early literacy development actually include several phases of learning through which children progress in different ways and at different rate. It is an exciting and complex process that usually occurs between the ages five through eight. As in most other areas of development, all children do not follow one clear sequential path in lock step. Rather, individual children may take a variety of routes to reading and writing mastery. Literacy learning is circular or "recursive"; learners may move forward in some areas and seem to step back as they consolidate understanding in others. Thus, reading and writing may not develop evenly. A child may be fluent in one area and emergent in another.

Ultimately however, whatever the timetable or path, the goals are the same for all: to become fluent and efficient readers and writers who can make sense of and convey meaning in written language; to become thinkers and communicators who are actively reviewing and analyzing information; to enjoy reading and writing; and, to feel successful as users of literacy for a variety of purposes.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Being in a multicultural and multilingual society exposes children to different languages in the home, community and school. However, the use of the English language in Malaysia is quite extensive due to its status as a second language. So, young learners have to engage with texts in English in their environment and construct meaning based on their lifeworlds. Most of the research pertaining to the development of literacy (e.g. Cook-Gumperz, 1979; Hickman, 1985; Snow, 1986) has been conducted with English-speaking children. It is not clear how initial exposure to literacy in a second language affects the subsequent development of literacy skills in that language. And since most Malaysian children are learners of English as a second language, we need to understand more about how these young learners acquire literacy in English in domains outside of the school and hence the need for research in literacy development in English in Malaysia.

Traditionally, it has been believed that children were supposed to learn to read well before they were expected to write. Currently, language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught as discrete skills in our schools. However, from an emergent literacy perspective, reading and writing develop concurrently and interrelatedly in young children, fostered by experiences that permit and promote meaningful interaction with oral and written language (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Speaking and listening skills cannot be viewed as separate entities and in addition, reading and writing are not divorced from talk mediated through interactions with others. Development of literacy in English cannot be fully understood without understanding the contexts in which literacy is experienced. We need to understand further how the reading-writing connection may play out in the literacy development of young learners in

Malaysia. Therefore, there is a need to research literacy development in English in terms of the reading-writing connection.

In order to understand more about how young Malaysian learners develop by way of literacy in English, we have to identify the literacy practices of these young learners. We also need to know how to develop literacy in English amongst these young learners in various domains. Knowledge of what constitutes as literacy development in English will enable teachers to take necessary steps to ensure these learners achieve their optimum learning potentials in the language. We need to examine the contexts that facilitate this knowledge, beginning with the larger context of society, and then narrowing the focus to the community and finally to the home environments and family interactions. Therefore there is a need to research literacy development in English amongst Malaysian young learners vis-à-vis their practices in specific domains. Thus far a great deal of emphasis has been focused on the formal domain of the school. Literacy practices have been examined with regards to students as classroom members with teachers facilitating the literacy practices. However, the literature suggests that what is learnt in the classroom is a continuation of what is learnt in the domain of the home and community. As such, to effectively carry out this research, we need to look outside the context of school. This study will not foreground the school but instead the domains of home and community.

Thus, to understand all these, we need an in-depth exploration of how young learners develop literacy practices and hence a case study might be the best approach. This study therefore is a qualitative case study that investigates how a young Malaysian child acquires and develops literacy in the English language through the reading-writing connection in the domains of home and community. It is an in-depth portrait of a young

learner's literacy practices in English in relation to texts and focusing in the domains outside school namely the home and the community.

1.3 The Research Questions

This in-depth case study of a young learner is driven by the following research questions:

1. What are the literacy practices of the young learner in the domain of the home?
2. What are the literacy practices of the young learner in the domain of the community?
3. How do significant persons in these domains influence his literacy practices?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This case study is significant because the insights gained will add to the understanding of responsive pedagogy in relation to literacy development in English of young learners. We have to focus on the young learners because childhood is a transitional stage when children learn the basic underlying skills that are necessary for the formal schooling. We have to strengthen the basic foundation of language learning and literacy development of the young learners because ultimately the language skills that they learn and gain at a young age will be used in the real world. The Malay proverb "*melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya*" which literally means if we want to bend bamboo, we have to start from the shoots suggests that the best time to teach any skills or knowledge to a person is right from an early age because that is the stage where children are most malleable, moldable and able to absorb knowledge.

We live in a world where visual images are becoming increasingly important as most information is presented as a combination of words and images and semiotic codes. It is essential that learners not only have the capacity to derive literal meaning from these texts but also to develop an understanding of how the texts are produced. Learners should learn to critically analyse the visual texts and the socio-cultural contexts surrounding the information. Hopefully, the insights gained in this study should help teachers contextualize and design the teaching-learning process in the English language classroom.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided the background of my study, discussing the social dimensions of literacy development and literacy in English for young learners in relation to the domains of the school, home and community as well as literacy development of young learners through the reading-writing connection. I have also included the statement of the problem, the research questions and the significance of the study. In the following chapter I will draw on the relevant conceptual and research literature in which this study hinges upon.