

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

One of the clearest lessons that I learned in my 25 years as an educator is that there is no single pathway to literacy learning. Indeed, there are probably as many pathways as there are literacy learners, because we all learn to be literate in rich social contexts as we engage in unique sets of human relationships (Cairney, 1995 in Hannon, 1995, p. 54).

In modern literate societies children have been witness to the existence of print and the relationship between humans and print from birth. Literacy is embedded in every day living activities. Danial, the key participant in this case study was only one child out of all the literacy learners in our society and educational institutions. In this in-depth portrait of Danial's literacy development in English through the reading-writing connection, there were indeed many pathways in which he had traveled on for this educational journey. He not only develop literacy in English through formal learning in the domain of the school, but also through his every day interactions with print texts, electronic texts and other forms of multimedia as well as social interactions with significant others in his life such as his parents, siblings and peers in the domain of home and community.

In this final chapter I present the summary of my key findings, discuss their implications for ESL teaching and finally bring this study to a close.

5.1 Summary Of Findings

This case study of a young learner's literacy development in English through the reading-writing connection was driven by three research questions which were formulated to identify the literacy practices of the young learner in the domains of the

home and the community as well as how significant persons in these domains influence his literacy practices. The findings of this study are summarized according to these three research questions.

5.1.1 Literacy Practices in the Domain of Home

Literacy development in English in the domain of the home was the main focus of the first research question. I set out to identify Danial's literacy practices in his home and discovered that his life at home was filled with engagement with literacy in various forms. He interacted with a variety of print texts in the form of books, comics, newspapers, magazines and other printed materials, visual images on electronic media such as television and films on video compact discs, computer games and the Playstation games. Danial's activities surrounding these literacy texts were also characterised by the elements of talk and play.

Danial learned that written speech represented his thoughts and that reading and writing were used for the purpose of communicating something meaningful. He understood that there was a difference between "book language" and every day colloquial speech. He also knew that a printed message was constant and read the same way each time. Besides that, he realised that a book contained print and pictures and that in some books, the print was the major source of information. He also learned the conventions of reading and writing (for example reading from left to right and top to bottom, treating spaces as dividers between words and pausing at the punctuation marks) and he continuously bridged his previous knowledge of reading and writing with new ones, making them more purposeful and deliberate. In addition, he learned some of the spelling rules that would facilitate writing in later grades. Furthermore, Danial learned specific

reading strategies that helped him figure out unknown words or the meaning of a complicated sentence.

He also consolidated his learning of social functions through talking and playing. Having a large vocabulary, being able to choose the correct grammatical form for the specific message being communicated, understanding the oral speech of others, sustaining a conversation, discussing events in a sequence, and being motivated to use language in various problem solving contexts (social and cognitive) are important components of oral language development. All these were facilitated through literacy activities such as in his drawing of dinosaurs and *Digimon* characters, his production of comic books and his writing of shopping lists during play after running errands for his mother. He had drawn from his available resources of books and comics as well as other print texts in his home and made intertextual links in his own production of writing.

5.1.2 Literacy Practices in the Domain of Community

The second research question focused on the domain of the community. The local environment where Danial lives in is rich with semiotic codes and symbolic messages such as house numbers, road names, advertisements on billboards, posters, banners, shop fronts, the colours of the traffic lights as well as print texts and visual images in the shopping centres, supermarkets and film theatres. Writing and reading require an understanding of symbols; and thus far, Danial had shown that he was able to think symbolically and that he was able to construct an understanding of the natural and social world around him.

The shopping mall and the theatres which Danial frequented, were centres of multimodality and littered with semiotic codes and logographic symbols such as P for

parking, B for basement, signs for the washrooms, lifts and stairs, numbers and alphabet as indicators for different floors in the lifts and many others. He was exposed to a wide range of linguistic and visual designs when he saw print texts and visual images on posters, price tags, names, brands, types and categories of items on sale. He was also exposed to audio designs when he heard songs, music or sound effects on films as well as announcements over the public address (PA) system whereas the spatial design was played out in the form of the layout of the shops, restaurants or the theatres (NLG, 2000). Danial was also aware of the sociocultural behaviours in restaurants such as the hand gestures to call a waiter and to ask for the bill after a meal.

Danial's awareness of semiotic codes and logographic symbols enabled him to function in his social environment. According to Vygotsky (1978), these semiotic mediation acts as assistance in the ZPD, in addition to deliberate instructions or assistance of others physically present in the situation.

5.1.3 The Influences of Significant Others in the Learner's Literacy Practices

Research question three focused on the significant persons in Danial's life who influenced his literacy development. Basically, three main groups of people facilitated his literacy development: his parents, his siblings and his friends. His parents provided a literacy-rich environment by promoting home literacy activities for their children. They read aloud and shared and explored books and other reading materials with Danial. They encouraged Danial's literacy development at home by providing reading and writing resources such as books, comics, magazines, newspapers in English and writing materials. They also talked and listened to Danial to promote his oral language development for example at the dinner table, Danial and his parents shared the day's

school stories and discussed social events in each others' lives as well as talking about every day happenings or issues that cropped up during the day. They also encouraged him to draw pictures or "write" about the stories he had read or listened to or watched and provided him with a positive role model by taking time to read and write with him or within his sight.

In his literacy-rich home environment, Danial had the occasions for daily reading, extended discourse (extensive talking or writing), language play, experimentation with literacy materials, book talk (discussion of characters, action, and plot), and dramatic play with his siblings. Danial had formed a discourse community of *Pokemon* and *Digimon* lovers as well as Playstation players with his friends. Through talking, he was communicating with others. Through talking and listening he was sharing information, offering explanations, providing alternative perspectives and exchanging ideas.

Listening and speaking skills cannot be viewed as separate components and in addition, reading and writing are not divorced from talk mediated through interactions with others. For Vygotsky (1978) in McGee & Richgels (2000) all learning involves a movement from doing activities in social situation with the support of a more knowledgeable other to internalizing the language and actions of the more knowledgeable other and being able to use this knowledge alone (p.5).

5.2 Implications for ESL Teaching

Today's society is a literate society. As displayed in this research, literacy takes place in a social context where texts feature and where people talk about these texts. In Malaysia, children are exposed to multiple languages in the home, community and school and they are able to function well within their sociocultural lifeworlds. English, being the official second language in Malaysia, is used extensively in the home, school and

community in one form or another. Besides the literacy practices and informal literacy learning in the home and community, schools play an important role in the teaching and learning of the English language. The knowledge and insights gained from this study are significant for language teachers and parents whereby they may take necessary steps to ensure that their learners and their children achieve their maximum learning potentials in language learning. Teacher educators also benefit from the findings of this study because they will be able to help teacher trainees in their preparation for the teaching and learning process in the English language classroom.

5.2.1 Literacy-rich Environment

Literacy-rich environments at home, in the community and at school, are important in promoting literacy. In literacy-rich classrooms, teachers should incorporate the characteristics of literacy-rich home environments such as providing an abundance of children's books and relevant literacy materials like posters, notices and labels. They could also use grouping for learning, developmentally appropriate practices, and literacy routines in the form of buddy reading system or book clubs. In addition, they have classroom designs that continue to encourage reading and writing (McGee & Richgels, 2000) through learning centers and engaged learning activities. A language-rich environment is one that is filled with meaningful print that is read regularly and incorporated into a variety of language lessons. It is also an environment that contains a well-stocked and maintained classroom library, a writing centre, a listening station, and many opportunities for cooperative learning and structured play.

5.2.2 Social Support for Literacy Development

Oral language develops as children feel the need to communicate their needs, feelings, and ideas and to engage others in social interactions. A primary way to support young children's language development is to structure activities and occasions when conversation is fostered in a natural and spontaneous manner. Teachers bring further support to these situations when they act as good language models, show genuine interest in what children have to say and find ways to extend children's vocabularies and repertoire of sentence structures without placing undue pressure on children to conform to adult language standards.

5.2.3 Psychological Climate for Literacy Development

"Happy, relaxed, stimulating relationships between children and between child and teacher promote growth of personality which in turn advances achievement." (Clay, 1991, p. 40). Teachers should show that they believe in the children's potential as readers and writers. Teachers in the ESL classroom must assist children in building their self-confidence by maintaining an emphasis on enjoyment, fun and laughter, remaining sensitive to cultural differences between children, and between teacher and child, offering children choices and supporting their decision making and problem solving, emphasising mistakes as opportunities to learn and encouraging approximations as steps en route to new achievements and stopping instructional sequences before the children tire.

5.2.4 Activities to Facilitate Literacy Development

- ESL teachers should become good language models and read to the children daily from a variety of good fiction and nonfiction books. A quality reading collection should contain a variety of genres and reflect the diversity of our society. Favourite books should

be reread many times. The emphasis in this important routine should be on making the experiences enjoyable. The value of this practice probably cannot be overstated. An extensive body of research exists that supports the many benefits children receive from their involvement in daily (or more) story time experiences. Teachers should respect the language the children bring to school and use that language as a foundation for further growth.

Research suggests that the most significant gains in learning can be made when the new concepts and skills presented to a child are slightly ahead of what the child does independently or without help. In other words, instruction should challenge the child and aim towards the upper levels of what Vygotsky calls the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Ideally, early literacy standards should guide this process by being aligned with the developmental patterns for specific literacy skills and concepts, giving a teacher a way to place a child along a continuum of skills and also to see the next level at which she should aim instruction. That level should not be so high as to frustrate the child nor so low as to slow down the child's progress, and it should not skip any significant developmental steps.

5.3 Conclusion

Most children in today's literate societies are introduced to reading by seeing a parent immersed in the act of reading and through "story-time," an enjoyable experience shared by parent and child. By having a model who obviously values reading, children eventually learn to value reading themselves. By sharing "story-time" with a loved one, children eventually learn two very important things about reading. The first thing they learn is that reading is enjoyable and rewarding. The second thing they learn is that print

is simply a representation of speech. Children in literate environments also develop the ability to write quite naturally, and they seem to have an intrinsic desire to produce "written language." Their initial attempts at writing take the form of squiggles and lines which eventually turn into pictorial representations and forms that look like words. At a later stage, children invent their own spelling, and do so systematically and in a rule-governed manner.

This case study of a young learner's literacy development in English through the reading-writing connection has shown that introduction to literacy must be meaningful and reading something that makes sense is much easier than reading something that does not. Similarly, children should begin to write for a meaningful purpose for example to express a thought or feeling. Writing to communicate is much easier than writing for no obvious intrinsic reason.

Additionally, the link between oral language and print is easier to make when awareness of it emerges naturally rather than when that link is explicitly taught. Children seem to pick up the association between symbols and sounds rather easily from their environment. Affect plays an invaluable role in reading and writing. A child who enjoys reading is motivated to read, will read more, and by doing so, will be a better reader. Similarly, a child who enjoys reading is motivated to write, will write more, and by doing so, will become a better writer. Since reading and writing are interrelated, writing frequently improves reading and vice versa.

In conclusion, this research hopes to create awareness and support among teachers and parents regarding children's literacy development as it grows and changes in the years from birth through primary school.