CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background to the Study

Children experience rapid growth in language development within the first five years of their life (Yardley, 1970: 144). By the time they reach four years of age, they would have already acquired a vocabulary of more than 2,000 words (Wood, 1976: 103); at the age of five, they can speak and understand almost as well as their parents; and when they are six, they already have an estimated vocabulary of 13,000 words (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2007: 71). According to Garvey (1984: 2),

> "Children talk from a number of motives, for a number of purposes. They talk to share a feeling or impression with others, to influence others and to evoke predictable responses from them; at times children talk to keep themselves company or to help in ordering and understanding their physical and perceptual world; sometimes they talk just for fun and sometimes because talk is an inextricable part of some activity in which they are engaged. And, of course, very often they talk when they are urged, prompted, and encouraged to do so by their caregivers."

But what exactly do these budding conversationalists talk about?

Children's language has intrigued researchers since the 18th century. Pioneers such as Jean Piaget (1967), Lev Vygotsky (1971), Susan Ervin-Tripp (1977), Michael Halliday (1981) and Jerome Bruner (1983) contributed to the early stages of this field of study with diverse findings on aspects ranging from cognitive development and language acquisition to bilingualism, language socialisation and language functions. The 20th century saw the emergence of child language researchers such as Elinor Ochs Keenan (1974, 1976), Catherine Garvey (1984), Michael McTear (1985) and Susan Foster (1985, 1986) who conducted their studies based on children's conversations. Some of

these studies will be discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 1 starts with an overview of the location of the study. It is followed by an outline of the Malaysian education system, a description of the role of English in the country and the definition of Malaysian English. The second half of this chapter contains the statement of the problem, the purpose, scope, significance and limitations of the study and concludes with a summary.

1.2   Overview of Malaysia and Petaling Jaya

Figure 1.1: Map of Malaysia

Malaysia consists of Peninsular Malaysia − which comprises three federal territories and 11 states, as well as the states of Sarawak and Sabah in Borneo. Covering an area of 329,758 sq km, this melting pot of various cultures has a multiracial population of 28,672,551 (Department of Statistics, 2011) with the dominant ones being Malay, Chinese, Indian and the minorities being Punjabi, Eurasian, Portuguese, Thai, Arab, KadazanDusun, Bajau, Murut, Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Dayak, Melanau and other indigenous tribes. Therefore, it is not surprising that this multilingual country has

around 80 languages and an even larger number of dialects. This conservative estimate excludes foreign languages such as Japanese, French and German (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992).

Figure 1.2: Map of Selangor

The city of Petaling Jaya is located within the Petaling district in the state of Selangor. Selangor covers an area of over 7,930.20 sq km and reached a population figure of 5,411,324 in 2010, the highest in the country (Department of Statistics, n.d.), while Petaling Jaya covers an area of 97.2 sq km and has more than 480,000 residents (figure as at 20 March 2009). The first planned town in Malaysia, it was originally the site of

the 486ha Effingham Estate, which was developed in 1952 to solve the overpopulation as well as the squatter problem in Kuala Lumpur at that time. Due to industrialisation, it experienced strong economic growth and became the biggest and most affluent satellite town in Selangor 20 years later. It was declared a city on 20 June 2006 (Petaling Jaya City Council, n.d.).

Petaling Jaya was chosen as it is a thriving city with steady population growth and therefore has numerous government and private preschools as well as child care and development centres, including the centre that participated in this study. It is easily accessible by road and is about a 15 minutes' drive from the researcher's home. This allowed the researcher to commute regularly between her home and the centre during the period of study. The following section outlines the current state of the education system in Malaysia.

1.3   The Malaysian Education System

The national education system consists of preschool education, primary education, secondary education and post-secondary education. Preschool education caters for children between four to six years of age. It is followed by six years of primary education at national schools or national type schools. The next level is made up of lower and upper secondary education, which is available at academic schools, technical and vocational schools as well as religious national schools (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Students who have completed their secondary education can opt to further their studies at public and private institution of higher learning or join the workforce.

According to the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) (2011), the Malaysian education system has made significant strides in the past 50 years. It has an adult literacy rate of 92%, universal primary school enrolment and has one of the highest growth rates in secondary school enrolment among developing countries. However, it still trails behind countries such as Singapore, Korea as well as Hong Kong. Additionally, the gap within Malaysian student outcomes has widened as 20% failed to meet the minimum Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) benchmarks for Mathematics and Science in 2007, as opposed to 5% − 7% in 2003 (Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, 2011).

1.3.1   Education NKRA

In order to further improve the Malaysian education system, the Education National Key Result Areas (NKRA), which is one of the National Key Result Areas of the Government Transformation Programme (GTP), has been initiated to improve educational outcomes in order to build a strong and competitive workforce (PEMANDU, 2011). The GTP was launched in January 2010 to address citizens' key areas of concern and to assist in the realisation of Vision 2020 in nine years' time, when Malaysia achieves the status of a developed and high income nation (PEMANDU, 2011). It comprises six pillars or National Key Result Areas (NKRA) – reducing crime, fighting corruption, widening access to quality and affordable education, raising living standards of low income households, improving infrastructure in rural areas and improving urban public transport. In order to widen the access to quality and affordable education, the government is focusing on the Education NKRA, which are

- Preschool enrolment rate

- Literacy and numeracy (LINUS)

- High performance schools

- New incentives for heads of schools

The government's move in increasing preschool enrolment is a step in the right direction as according to Bloom (1964), the individual develops 50% of his mature intelligence from conception to age four, another 30% from age four to eight and the remaining 20% from age eight to 17. Since the individual experiences very rapid growth of intelligence in the early years, the highly significant influence of the early environment on this development should not be overlooked. Additionally, the findings of the High/Scope Perry Preschool study showed that high quality preschool programmes for young children living in poverty contribute to their intellectual and social development in childhood, their school success, economic performance and reduced commission of crime in adulthood (Schweinhart, 2004). According to Roopnarine and Johnson (1997 as cited in Rohaty, 1998) preschoolers experience a highly sensitive period of development and therefore should be educated as early as possible. Rohaty (1998) affirmed this and stated that it was vital that children experience an effective, meaningful and positive preschool education in order that they may be equipped with the necessary skills, self-confidence and positive attitude before beginning formal education.

The target and aspiration of this sub-NKRA has been defined by focusing on the increase of preschool enrolment for children aged five and six and improving the quality of the education system. Specifically, for children aged five, the target is to increase enrolment and improve the existing quality of education, while for children aged six, the focus is on improving the quality of education and increasing the

enrolment in suburban and rural areas. Seven cores initiatives have been identified to achieve this:

- The establishment of the National Committee on Preschool Education and a Preschool Division within the Ministry of Education to govern all preschool providers

- The implementation of the National Standard Preschool Curriculum

- The harmonisation of support of government preschool students

- The improvement of the quality of preschool teachers and teaching assistants

- The increase of the number of preschool classes

- The increase of public-private partnerships in preschool education

- The setting up of the National Preschool Information System

In order to raise the quality and professionalism of early childcare education in the country, the Education Ministry will be training a total of 21,000 preschool teachers from 2010 to 2012 at teacher training institutes, public tertiary institutions and private tertiary institutions. This is to accommodate the increase in the enrolment of children aged four and five in preschools from 67% (342,706) in 2009 to 87% (447,556) by 2012 (Chin, 2010) and 97% by 2020 under the Government Transformation Programme (Chang, 2011).

In December 2010, preschool enrolment was 72.42%, exceeding the initial target of 72%. A record breaking total of 1,500 preschool classes were opened, allowing more than 700,000 preschoolers aged four and five to begin early education. There are currently an estimated 15,000 preschools in the country. Of this number, 5,100 are privately-run, while 1,600 are operated by the National Unity and Integration Department (JPNIN) and 8,300 are operated by the Community Development

Department (Kemas) (Chin, 2010). According to the Ministry of Education, the total enrolment figures for the Primary and Secondary schools nationwide in 2011 were 2,859,921 and 2,296,034 respectively (Ministry of Education, 2011).

1.3.2   Malaysian Preschool Education

As stated in the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2010), preschool education has been a part of the national education system since 1996. It aims to expand the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social potential of preschoolers between ages four and six in a holistic and integrated manner. This is achieved by providing a learning environment that is safe as well as enriching and by conducting activities that are fun, creative and meaningful. This is done in order to improve preschoolers' skills, instil confidence and build a positive self-image, which will help them succeed in the existing environment and prepare them for the challenges and responsibilities of primary school education in the future. Preschool education in Malaysia focuses on the child-centred teaching and learning process, which emphasises on discovery inquiry, uses the integrated teaching and learning as well as the learning through play approaches, promotes contextual as well as project-based learning, and is thematic.

The National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2010) comprises six cores – communication, spiritual, attitude and values, humanity, personal skills, physical and aesthetic development as well as science and technology (Ministry of Education, 2010). All government and private preschools are required to adhere to the National Preschool Standard Curriculum and integrate it with their existing preschool programmes, which range from the traditional or academic models to the Froebel,

Montessori, Piaget, Head Start, holistic development as well as the open and mixed curriculums (Sufean, 2004).

Under the Communication core of the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2010), all preschoolers are required to learn Bahasa Malaysia and English. Therefore, they are exposed to at least two languages simultaneously or three, if they attend Mandarin or Tamil stream preschools. Preschools using Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction need to allocate 600 minutes for Bahasa Malaysia and another 600 minutes for English. Preschools using Mandarin or Tamil as the medium of instruction need to allocate 400 minutes for Bahasa Malaysia, 400 minutes for English and 400 minutes for either Mandarin or Tamil (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1

Time Allocation for Languages According to Preschool's Medium of Instruction

Language		Minimum time per week allocated for other languages according to medium of instruction (minute)	
		Bahasa Malaysia	Other languages
1.	Bahasa Malaysia	600	400
2.	English	600	400
3.	Mandarin/Tamil/English	-	400
Total		1200	1200

(Source: Ministry of Education, 2010)

The standard content for the English communication core is divided into listening and speaking, pre-reading, reading and writing skills. According to the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2010), preschoolers should be able to listen to simple sentences; follow simple instructions; talk about familiar experiences in simple sentences; speak politely with appropriate intonation; read simple story books suitable to their stage of cognitive development; retell stories heard in simple sentences;

recognise alphabets; know basic phonics and write simple phrases after attending preschool (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2

Standard Content for Communication – English

Focus	At the end of preschool, students are able to:
Listening and speaking skills	Listen to and discriminate sounds
	Listen to and understand meaning of simple words
	Acquire and use simple phrases and statements
	Listen to and follow simple instructions
	Listen to and enjoy nursery rhymes, action songs, poems and stories
	Sing songs and recite rhymes and poems
	Tell simple stories
	Dramatise familiar situations and stories
	Perform a variety of language forms and functions in a social content
	Ask simple questions
Pre-reading skills	Understand that printed materials contain meaning
	Acquire knowledge of print and ethics in reading
Reading skills	Identify letters of the alphabet
	Read simple words with understanding
	Read phrases with understanding
	Read simple sentences with understanding
	Develop interest in reading
Writing skills	Acquire pre-reading skills
	Acquire writing skills

(Source: Ministry of Education, 2010)

Having presented the general details of the Malaysian education system, the section now proceeds with a description of the role of English, the country's second language, as well as the definitions of the Malaysian variety of English, or Malaysian English. This is deemed necessary as English is formally taught from the preschool level and is used by the population at large, including preschoolers of the present study who display the phonological, lexical and syntactic characteristics of Malaysian English in their daily conversations.

1.4   English Language in Malaysia

Prior to the National Language Policy in 1967, English and Malay were the official languages of the country. However, after its implementation, English was relegated to a strong second language, while Malay retained its position and was renamed Bahasa Malaysia in 1969 (Augustin, 1982; Preshous, 2001; Crystal, 2003; Baskaran, 2005). Nevertheless, English remained a prestigious language as well as a mark of education (Asmah 1967; Gaudart, 1995; Kuang, 2007), and is one of the main languages for communication among the multicultural society of Malaysia. According to Crystal (2003: 63), in 2001 it was estimated that 380,000 out of a population of 22,230,000 in Malaysia used English as their first language, while 7,000,000 adopted it as their second language. Contrary to popular assumption, the Eurasians were not the only ethnic group whose major home language was English as researchers have found that other ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese and Indians also use English to communicate with their family members (Asmah, 1967; Gaudart, 1995).

The use of English as a lingua franca in Malaysia has resulted in the creation of Malaysian English, which has also been referred to as Manglish or Malenglish (McArthur, 1998; Preshous, 2001: Baskaran, 2005; Pillai, 2006). Many local and foreign researchers have provided definitions of Malaysian English. According to Preshous (2001), the unique features of Malaysian English are lexical, grammatical as well as phonological, and include loanwords, changes in meaning, the emphatic particle *lah*, code-switching and code-mixing. Additionally, Pillai and Fauziah Kamaruddin (2006) stated that Malaysian English possesses different pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, grammatical as well as pragmatic features.

Malaysian English is as unique as other Englishes such as Singaporean English, Jamaican English, Indian English and Philippine English. Baskaran (2005), the author of "A Malaysian English Primer: Aspects of Malaysian English Features", states that the uniqueness of this variety is due to the fact that it incorporates local languages such as Malay, Chinese and Tamil, which have indelibly influenced its phonology, syntax and lexis. She noted that it is used at three social levels – acrolect (standard Malaysian English), mesolect (dialectal Malaysian English) – through which Malaysian English is predominantly featured, and basilect (patois Malaysian English). She further defines the acrolect as the standard variety used for official and educational purposes, while the informal mesolect is commonly used in semi-formal situations with family members, friends as well as colleagues. The basilect is a form of colloquial patois or the uneducated style of speech. Another researcher, Morais (2001), also divides it into three varieties – Malaysian English Type 1 or the high variety that is used in formal interactions; Malaysian English Type 2 or the colloquial variety common in informal interactions where acculturation or nativisation is most evident; and the basilectal variety used by members of the blue collar working class.

The type of Malaysian English acquired by children is influenced by a number of factors. According to Tongue (1979), "When a language is not the first language of a majority of the population, the manner in which it changes will be significantly influenced by the previously learned language habits of the people who use it." Therefore, the variety of English acquired at home depends on the variety used by parents or caregivers (Pillai, 2006: 65), which is in turn affected by the cultural and ethnic differences that exist in linguistic background of the speaker and his/her community. According to Holzman (1997: 130), children master the basic syntax of the language spoken in the speech community at around the age of four. Researchers have

shown that although most Malaysian children speak the mesolectal variety at home (Baskaran, 2005), they are also able to converse in the acrolectal variety (Pillai, 2006).

Although this section focused on providing an overview of English in Malaysia and the definition of Malaysian English, it did not delve further into the varieties of English or the level of Malaysian English spoken by Malaysian preschoolers as the study is confined to the analysis of the topics of their English conversations. And due to the similar reason, it did not include definitions of Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil, even though Malaysian preschoolers are also exposed to these languages. The section now shifts its focus to the study and elaborates on the statement of the problem as well as its purpose, scope, significance and limitations.

1.5   Statement of the Problem

The present study is motivated by the lack of studies in Malaysian preschoolers' conversational topics, particularly in the preschool setting. This is evident from the fact that the majority of researches on children's discourse in Malaysia are confined to the analysis of aspects such as language acquisition (Asmah Haji Omar, 2000), communication strategies (Kow, 2003; Pillai, 2003), bilingualism (Tan, 2003; Kuang, 2009), trilingualism (Kuang, 2008), grammar (Yeoh, 1978) as well as vocabulary, fluency and language development (Fatimah Haron, 1991).

The only Malaysian child discourse research that was related to the study of preschoolers' conversational topic in the preschool setting was conducted by Wong and Thambyrajah (1991). Both researchers explored and compared topic maintenance and topic shifting in the conversations of 3- and 5-year-olds. Their findings showed that

while the 3-year-olds were capable to conversing competently, they were unable to sustain a topic over several turns and do not wait for the completion of the previous turn before shifting their topic. In comparison, the 5-year-olds showed greater ability in maintaining and developing a topic over a longer stretch of utterances.

The other study on preschoolers' conversational topics was conducted by Marvin, Beukelman, Brockhaus and Kast (1994) in the United States of America. They discovered that in both preschool and home settings, preschoolers referred predominantly to the "here and now" and to themselves. Additionally, the most common and frequent semantic referents were objects, events and ideas about people's traits and conditions.

The studies by Wong and Thambyrajah (1991) as well as Marvin et al. (1994) illustrate that studies on preschoolers' conversational topic are capable of providing vital, current and useful information on preschoolers' conversational competence that would not have been available if these researches were not conducted.

Considering the gap in our understanding concerning preschoolers' conversational topics, the study takes off from the assumption that when placed in a preschool setting and having their peers as their conversation partners, urban Malaysian preschoolers' conversations will revolve mainly around

- Toys
- Video games or electronic game gadgets
- Themselves – their personal information, likes and dislikes, possessions and their homes

- Parents, siblings, grandparents, caregivers (nannies/babysitters), relatives, neighbours, teachers or peers, especially those whom they are close to and/or interact with regularly

- Cartoon and characters from movies, cartoons, comic books as well as children's programmes

This assumption was made because children tend to talk about concrete concepts such as people and objects that they can observe, interact or play with as opposed to abstract concepts, emotions or past experiences.

1.6   Purpose and Scope of the Study

The aim of this study is to analyse the topics occurring in urban Malaysian preschoolers' conversations in the preschool. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the conversational topics of urban Malaysian preschoolers in terms of the referential frames of Time, Person and Content?

2. Which conversational topics, in terms of the referential frames of Time, Person and Content are most frequently referenced by urban Malaysian preschoolers?

1.7   Significance of the Study

Studies on child conversation have yielded significant findings that not only provided a clearer and more accurate understanding of children's evolving language abilities, but also countered inaccurate assumptions. For instance, Piaget's theory of egocentric speech was proven inaccurate by researchers such as Vygotsky (1971) who argued that it actually functioned as inner speech as well as Keenan (1974) who provided findings

which showed that young children are capable of attending to each other's speech. Both researchers were supported by Nelson and Gruendel (1979) who stated that the misperception of young children as egocentric was due to their misplaced assumption of shared context and knowledge. Their study showed that young children had no problem conversing with someone who shared their focus and background knowledge. These findings exemplified the importance and significance of conducting studies on preschoolers' conversations.

Similarly, a study on the conversational topics of urban Malaysian preschoolers is expected to contribute to the current gap by providing a realistic and current picture of their conversational skills. It will shed light on the conversational skills of urban Malaysian preschoolers in terms of their topic selections and elaborations, besides creating a broader understanding of their interests. Additionally, it will identify preschoolers' conversational topics and describe their most frequently used topic categories in the preschool setting, specifically the "when", "what" or "who" they typically reference in their conversation with their peers and teachers. It has the potential to stimulate further studies and investigations such as cross-cultural comparisons of preschoolers' conversational topics. Additionally, it may assist parents, child care professionals and educators in the building and maintenance of their interpersonal relationships with preschoolers.

The study will also contribute to the field of education as the findings provide a clearer picture of preschoolers' cognitive development and can assist in the crafting of a preschool curriculum that is relevant as well as mentally and physically stimulating to Malaysian preschoolers. It may also prove to be useful in the near future for the

development of augmentative and alternative communication in Malaysia, particularly in the devising of a system to assist children with expressive communication disorders.

Hence, this study of the dynamics of communication occurring in real-life contexts will contribute to the understanding and literature of this field of study as well as provide valuable insights into the linguistic, psychological and social development of urban Malaysian preschoolers. This is due to the fact that they come from diverse backgrounds and some exploration into their areas of discussion while interacting with each other enhances our perspective of child conversation.

1.8   Limitations of the Study

Owing to the fact that the study comprised only 18 urban, multiethnic preschoolers, the findings do not reflect the Malaysian preschool population in general. It would have been ideal if there were equal numbers of male and female representatives from all ethnic groups in the country (including Sabah and Sarawak) in the 4-, 5- and 6-year-old age brackets. However, this was impossible as the participants comprised of five Chinese girls, four Chinese boys, three Indian boys, one Indian girl, two Malay boys, one Malay girl and two Punjabi boys, who were from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Furthermore, the study was limited to preschoolers of an English medium preschool. There are many other preschools in Malaysia that use languages such as Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin or Tamil as the medium of instruction. Additionally, some of these government or privately-funded preschools are not only located in the city but also in suburbs and the interiors of Sabah and Sarawak. Although the results do not claim to

represent the majority of Malaysian preschoolers, they do provide some understanding of the conversational topics of Malaysian preschoolers.

Secondly, due to time, technical and financial constraints, the data was collected using a digital video camera on two separate occasions with each lasting four days, and was limited to a small population and confined to one preschool. Although the participants were recorded throughout the day – during reading time, drawing time, playtime, mealtime and activity time, it did not necessarily yield a large amount of data as the quality of recording varied. This is attributed to the fact that conversations are unpredictable by nature, more so if it involves preschoolers, who are not only unpredictable and abrupt, but are also unclear and have a lower proficiency of the English language (Hoff, 2009: 30). Utterances that lacked context, were unintelligible or were made up of requests for clarifications, attention getting devices, commands, fillers and vocalisation were not coded.

In addition to that, most preschoolers are active by nature and tend to fidget, walk about or run around after lessons, affecting the clarity of their speech. Occasionally, they would scream, shout, giggle and play with loud toys, adding to the existing extraneous noise. They also indulged in fleeting conversations and disappeared midway whenever they were drawn by other more interesting distractions. The mischievous ones made funny faces, actions and sounds at the camera as they enjoyed viewing themselves in the LCD screen. It would have been ideal if this method of recording was complemented by portable, voice-activated audio recorders that could be fastened on the participants. This would have produced an even more accurate transcription as well as analysis.

Thirdly, since only conversational topics in the preschool setting were analysed, it does not portray the complete repertoire of conversational topics the preschoolers possess. It is possible that they might also be capable of other conversational topics in different settings such as home, car, restaurant and playground, or occasions such as birthdays, weddings, funerals and holidays, and with different conversation partners such as parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives and strangers.

1.9   Summary

This chapter provided an introduction of the aspects related to this study. It began by providing a general idea of Malaysia and then proceeded to Petaling Jaya city where the research was conducted. As the study was conducted in a preschool, the section began with an overview of the Malaysian education system, which was followed by preschool education in Malaysia. This was warranted as significant changes have been made and enforced since the previous year. The current role and position as well as the variety of English used in the country were described as the study focused on the preschoolers' English conversations, which were of the Malaysian variety. The second half of the chapter consisted of the statement of the problem, purpose and scope of the study, research objectives as well as the significance and limitations of the study.

The section below illustrates the organisation of the remaining chapters:

Chapter 2 reviews the literature in this field of study, covering the history of child language studies, methods of data collection and analysis as well as studies on child conversation, specifically on conversational topics.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study, specifically the theoretical framework, research design, data description, data collection procedure, data analysis as well as the definition of terms.

Chapter 4 covers the findings of the study, which includes the analysis of excerpts and the 10 most common topic categories.

Chapter 5 provides a conclusion of the study and its implications as well as suggestions for future studies.