CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on the area of children's conversation. It examines how this field of study emerged and evolved to its current state. The chapter juxtaposes the study against the larger landscape of child language studies by illustrating the history, methods as well as past and current researches on child conversation in both western and Malaysian contexts.

2.2 How Child Language Studies Began

Child language studies began more than a century ago, sparked by interest in child development, specifically by a field now known as developmental psychology. According to Ingram (1989: 7), it was pioneered by psychologists, William Preyer (1841 – 1897) and Granville Stanley Hall (1844 – 1924). Preyer studied human development by experimentation and empirical observation, and among his interests was the establishment of cognition, language and the senses. One of his prominent works, "The Mind of the Child", which was published in 1882, advanced the study of development in the fields of psychology and biology (Cairns and Cairns, 2006). His peer, Hall, was the first American psychology professor and is known as the father of child psychology in America (Cairns and Cairns, 2006). He is recognised for his contribution in paving the way for the scientific study of children and adolescents in his country.

Apart from Preyer and Hall, also worthy of mention are psychologists Alfred Binet (1857 − 1911) and James Baldwin (1861 − 1932). Binet is credited for pioneering researches on individual differences and experimental child psychology as well as for developing the Binet-Simon scale, which is more commonly known as the IQ test. Baldwin, on the other hand, authored works such as "Mental Developments in the Child and the Race" and "Social and Ethical Interpretations of Mental Development" and played an important role in the scientific organisation of psychology. Preyer, Hall, Binet and Baldwin's works found resonance among many, some of whom continued their legacies, most notably Piaget and Vygotsky who were among the pioneers in the research on cognitive development.

2.3   Child Language Studies in the Early Years

In the 19th century, child language formed part of child research, which also included areas such as intelligence, honesty, emotionality, thinking, perception, growth and predictability (Cairns and Cairns, 2006). It was a secondary concern for researchers more interested in understanding, if not solving, the puzzle of cognitive development (Dore, 1983). "The Language and Thought of the Child" records one of Piaget's (1896 − 1980) more renowned studies of cognitive development, specifically child logic, at Maison des Petits de l'Institut Rousseau from 1921 to 1922. He observed and recorded the conversations of two 6-year-old boys and concluded that their conversations comprised the egocentric and socialised functions. According to Piaget (1967), egocentric speech was made up of repetition, monologue as well as dual or collective monologue. A child who indulges in egocentric speech speaks for the sake of speaking, regardless of whether he has the attention of his audience or not. His theory of egocentric speech, however, was much debated internationally.

Vygotsky (1896 – 1934) conducted similar experiments and found that contrary to Piaget's theories, egocentric speech functioned as inner speech, which was used in the mental operation of children as well as adults to devise solutions and for self-regulation. He also disagreed with Piaget's notion that egocentric speech preceded socialised speech and that it would die off when children approached school going age. According to him, egocentric and communicative speech – rather than socialised speech, are both social by nature although they serve different functions, and that egocentric speech is internalised as one develops into an adult. According to Cairns and Cairns (2006), Vygotsky (1971), Kuo (1937) and Buhler's (1931) investigations demonstrated that the rate of egocentric speech in Chinese, German and Russian children were less than 10% compared to the rate of Piaget's French subjects, which was above 40%. Nevertheless, Vygotsky (1971: 9 – 10) did not deny that Piaget revolutionised the study of child language and thought by approaching via the clinical method and providing experimental evidence.

Since then, many researchers have disputed and proven the inaccuracy of the theory of egocentric speech such as Keenan (1974) who studied her twin sons at age 2; 9 and found evidence which showed that young children are capable of attending to one another's utterances, although their ability to sustain coherent conversation is limited. Nelson and Grundel (1979) suggested that what was perceived as egocentrism is actually a misplaced assumption of shared context by one child or both children, and when the assumption is correct, dialogue will occur. In addition, O'Neill, Main and Ziemski (2009) concurred that 4-year-olds are capable of adapting their utterances to the perspective of their listeners.

2.4   The Three Major Periods in Child Language Studies

For his month-long study at Maison des Petits de l'Institut Rousseau, Piaget collected data by observing his subject, writing down every utterance his subject, and sometimes his subject's conversation partners, made in his diary. According to Ingram (1989: 7), this method is also known as the parental diary or baby biography, which was common between the years 1876 and 1926 due to growing interest in child language acquisition in America and Europe. Diary studies were conducted over a period of time by a linguist or parent observer and, depending on their interests, would focus on certain aspects of the child's development. This method normally focused on one or two child subjects at a time and was probably favoured as it allowed researchers to capture rich and descriptive data. Researchers who used this method to study their children include Tiedemann (1787), Taine (1877), Darwin (1877), Preyer (1882) Stern (1907) and Leopold (1939 – 1949).

According to Ingram (1989: 11 – 21), the period that followed was characterised by large sample studies. Lasting from 1926 to 1957, it was the result of the emergence of behaviourism, a form of psychology associated with Thomas B. Watson. In large sample studies, data was collected from a large number of subjects who were carefully chosen, comprising of equal numbers of male and female subjects from similar socio-economic classes. They tended to be cross-sectional, studying individual children of certain ages. Although these studies normally had one researcher to conduct data collection or testing to minimise variations in results, they differed from diary studies as the subjects' role in language learning was systematically observed and observable behaviour measured. These studies provided normative data, which helped researchers to determine the development of an individual child by conducting peer comparisons,

giving them an idea of where to begin in the study of a particular topic. Additionally, these studies yielded data that themselves was used for analysis. However, large sample studies suffered a lack of linguistic sophistication and had superficial content. They also focused on group data instead of the patterns of individual children. Another drawback of these studies was that data was manually collected using handwritten notes rather than with modern recording equipment. According to Ingram (1989: 14), researchers who used this method include Smith (1926), McCarthy (1930), Wellman et al. (1931), Young (1941), Fisher (1934), Day (1932) and Davis (1937).

The period after 1957 witnessed the emergence and increase of longitudinal studies. In a longitudinal study, the researcher visits the child at predetermined intervals and length of time to collect a representative sample. Occasionally, there may be two researchers who would divide the tasks of taking notes and interacting with the child among themselves. Sessions are tape recorded in order to be transcribed later. Unlike diary studies and large sample studies, longitudinal study researchers are usually not related to the subjects who would be specifically chosen. A minimum of three subjects is commonly chosen so as to determine the general features of acquisition. Compared to large sample studies, longitudinal studies involve larger data samples, giving a more representative sample of the child's general language ability.

The publication of Noam Chomsky's Syntactic Structures in 1957 and his subsequent work revolutionised the study of linguistics and language development – children's grammatical development in particular (Hoff, 2009: 12). According to Ingram (1989), in order to detect the emergence of rules and grammatical development, Braine (1963) combined both the parental diary and longitudinal methods, while Miller and Ervin (1964), Bloom (1970) and Brown (1973) conducted longitudinal studies. Kuang (2007)

noted that although it was indicated that a minimum of three subjects are required for longitudinal studies (Ingram, 1989) there have been exceptions such as studies by Asmah Haji Omar (2000) and Sriniwass (2005) where there were only one and two subjects respectively. Therefore, the term longitudinal studies can be further expanded.

Although these approaches in studying child language emerged in different periods, they continue to be relevant among modern linguists.

2.5   Methods of Collecting Language Data

As illustrated in the previous section, the study of child language has been conducted using different approaches since the 19th century. The following section elaborates on the methods of data collection – parental diaries as well as tape and video recorders – and their strengths as well as weaknesses.

2.5.1   Parental Diary

Parental diaries were the earliest method of data collection in child language studies. Although unsystematic and inconsistent, this practical method was applied until the middle of the 20th century when more systematic and comprehensive approaches were invented. They contained detailed and specific information as they were the records of researchers who were usually the parent(s) of the subject(s). This provided the researchers unlimited and exclusive access as well as close contact with their subjects.

The familiarity and close proximity between the observer and subject meant that relevant behaviours, which were common or represented new development instead of

idiosyncratic ones, were noted. It also minimises the hassle of making time arrangements, reduces child or parent anxiety and the need for intimidating and intrusive recording equipment (Kuang, 2007). The weakness of this method was that the parent observer might disregard important behaviours by only recording what s/he deemed as important development. It is compounded by the lack of theoretical orientation as well as the inconsistent frequency in recording, which leads to randomness in this time-consuming approach. Nevertheless, it plays an important role in providing a database for the field.

Researchers who kept parental diaries include Tiedemann (1748 – 1803), Taine (1876), Darwin (1877), Lewis (1936), Leopold (1939 – 49), Weir (1962) and Smith (1973). This data collection method was also applied in the study of other languages such as German (Preyer, 1889; Stern, 1907), French (Gregoire, 1937), Russian (Gvozdev, 1949) and Polish (Zarebina, 1965). In the Malaysian context, researchers who used this method in their studies include Asmah Haji Omar (2000) who investigated the language and thought of her grandson's (Ahmad Ridhwan) first three years; Pillai (2003) who researched on her daughter's (Kit) use of hesitations to communicate; Kuang (2009) who studied her son's (LH) acquisition of consonant sounds and Sriniwass (2005) who examined both her sons' (Hariram and Harilakshman) model for social interactions.

2.5.2 Tape and Video Recorders

The invention of the tape and video recorders in the late 20th century introduced new methods of data collection, which are practical, affordable, convenient and easily available. Properly used and strategically placed, they provide high quality recordings

of spontaneous conversation with clear and audible sounds. The video recorder has an extra advantage as it is capable of capturing audio as well as visual data. Unlike parental diaries, both tape and video recorders allow the researcher to review data repeatedly, yielding a more accurate and detailed analysis, and to duplicate if required.

Malaysian researchers who used the tape recorder were Tan (2003) in her study of bilingual children's cognitive skills in encoding temporal information and Jawakhir Mior Jaafar (2006) in her study of the English and Malay languages used by a group of children to communicate with their grandfather. The video recorder was used by Tan (2003) in her study on how bilingual preschoolers negotiate their play and Kuang (2008) in her research on conversations between a group of grandchildren and their grandparents. A more comprehensive and detailed method of data collection involves the use of both the tape as well as the video recorder. It has proved advantageous in researches conducted by Kuang (1999, 2002, 2006), which focused on the code-switching of a Malaysian Chinese family, the spoken language of a Malaysian 3-year-old as well as a 4-year old trilingual. Other researchers who have also used this approach include Kow (2002, 2003) and Tan (2003, 2005).

These three methods have been used in both large and small scale studies, and have been proven to be reliable in providing detailed and accurate data. As the majority of data in studies mentioned in section 2.4 and 2.5 comprise utterances by the subjects, the next section provides an overview of Conversation Analysis, which was how the data acquired for this study was analysed.

2.6   Conversation Analysis in the Study of Child Language

A conversation is said to take place whenever three consecutive remarks about the same subject are made by at least two children (Piaget, 1967: 52). Similarly, McLaughlin (1998: 277) defined conversation as a series of utterances shared by at least two persons. According to Grice (1957, 1975 as cited in Hoff, 2009), a conversationalist adheres to two basic rules of conversation, take turns and be cooperative – the cooperative principle consists of four maxims that dictate the quantity, quality, relation and manner of a conversation. In order to be communicatively competent, one is expected to have not only the ability to participate in interactive talk, but also the ability to produce monologues such as narratives (Hoff, 2009).

Conversation serves two functions – the transactional and interactional. According to Brown and Yule (1986: 1), transactional conversation involves the expression of content whereas interactional conversation, which forms a large part of daily speech, involves the expression of social relations and personal attitudes. The latter is also occasionally, a source of factual information. The social nature of conversation is also recognised by Crow (1983: 138) who described it as a primary means of developing and enriching a relationship, while Liddicoat (2007: 2) viewed it as a tool for socialising as well as developing and sustaining relationships. It was necessary to provide the relevant definitions as the present study focuses on the conversations of some urban Malaysian preschoolers, which is largely interactional.

For the present study, topic is defined as what an utterance is about at a particular point of a conversation (Wong and Thambyrajah, 1991). Therefore, depending on its

duration, a conversation may have more than one topic and it is possible for two or more utterances to share the same topic (Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976). Additionally, the choice of topic is largely determined by the knowledge or information shared between speakers (Nelson and Gruendel, 1979). Schank (1977 as cited in Sigman, 1983: 176) argued that only conversations can be said to have topics, which the researcher disagrees as according to Brown and Yule (1986) it is not sentences that have topics, but speakers. This is more accurate due to the fact that topics do not necessarily form one part of a sentence, and its existence is determined by the speakers themselves. Foster (1985) remarked that young children's ability to handle conversational topics is influenced by linguistics, cognitive and social factors.

Discourse Analysis in a nutshell is the analysis of language in use (Brown and Yule, 1986: 1). It concerns the analysis of both written, spoken or sign language data and consists of non-naturally occurring data such as articles, documents, speeches and journals as well as naturally occurring data such as conversations, interviews, debates and online chats. According to Yule (1996: 84) it focuses on "the record (spoken or written) of the process by which language is used in some context to express intention." Discourse Analysis comprises Critical Discourse Analysis, Discursive Psychology, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and, Conversation Analysis, which is the method of analysis used for the study.

Conversation Analysis focuses specifically on the study of spontaneous data or talk in interaction and investigates all areas of socially motivated talk (Liddicoat, 2007). It was inspired by Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman, and created in the 1960s by Harvey Sacks and his collaborators, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. Today, its use is not limited to the field of linguistics but applied in fields such as sociology,

psychology, philosophy, anthropology and speech-language pathology. According to Brown and Yule (1986: 3), "Conversation analysts have been particularly concerned with the use of language to negotiate role-relationships, peer solidarity, the exchange of turns in conversation, the saving of face of both speaker and hearer." Considering the fact that the subject, topic and environment of this study contained most of the language roles stated above, it was only apt that Conversation Analysis was selected as the approach for the study.

2.7   Studies of Child Conversation in Western Contexts

Since it was towards the end of the 1970s that interaction researchers started to use the word "conversation" to describe their subject (Craig and Tracy, 1983: 12), the researcher deduces that the study of children's conversation only gained momentum towards the end of the 20th century. A majority of these studies focused on peer conversation as it is, according to Hoff (2009: 115), "a truer, stricter, test of children's conversational abilities".

One of the earliest researches was conducted by Keenan (1974) who proved that children as young as two years old were capable of attending to each other's speech, contrary to Piaget's theory of egocentric speech. Her fellow researcher, Ervin-Tripp (1977) studied the varieties of forms used by children to realise directives and concluded that while they are able to differentiate between imperatives, modified imperatives, imbedded imperatives using questions and need statements, the ability to make indirect request is acquired much later. In 1979, Nelson and Gruendel argued that egocentrism in young children was in fact their misplaced assumption of shared context and knowledge and they were capable of conversing if they had a partner who shared

their focus and background knowledge. In the following decade, Garvey (1984) explored children's verbal play whereas McTear (1985) studied two preschoolers' conversational development. Foster (1986), on the other hand, studied the development of topic initiation of babies and toddlers and discovered that as children grow older, they successfully initiated more topics. Additionally, they experience change in terms of the type of topic initiated as well as the means of topic initiation, which shifts from non-verbal to verbal. This supported Brinton and Fujiki's (1984) findings, which showed that older children introduced and reintroduced topics less and produced more instances of topic shading as well as topics maintained. One of the more recent studies conducted by O'Neill et al. (2009) investigated preschoolers' spontaneous conversational initiations with peers during snack time and discovered that preschoolers mainly referenced person-related topics (77.5%) and used their developing understanding of mind to find common grounds with their peers.

2.8   Studies of Child Conversation in Malaysian Contexts

In Malaysia, Wong and Thambyrajah (1991) conducted one of the few children's conversational topic-related studies where they explored and compared topic maintenance and topic shift in the conversations of 3- and 5-year-old preschoolers. The results revealed that the conversational competence of 3-year-olds were far lower than that of 5-year-olds, who had better conversational skills and longer attention spans. Apart from this study, the researcher was unable to find other studies on Malaysian children's conversational topic.

Nevertheless, there were a number of studies on Malaysian child language studies which focused on different aspects. One of them was conducted by Kow (2003) who

investigated how children communicated meaning despite of their lack of vocabulary. Conducted in three preschools using three custom designed tasks, this study found that preschoolers used strategies such as word coining, exemplification, description and repetition to communicate meaning. Tan (2003), on the other hand, conducted research on 15 Malaysian bilingual children and five adults' ability to answer wh-questions and discovered that similar to monolinguals, bilinguals were also able to encode causal relationships before temporal relationships. Other Malaysian child language studies were longitudinal in nature and focused on not more than two child subjects, such as Asmah Haji Omar (2000)'s investigation of the language and thought in the first three years of a child's life. Apart from supporting Vygotsky's theory on the development of thought and language, her study also illustrated the ontogenetic development of speech. Her fellow researcher, Pillai (2003) explored the types of hesitation features present in the speech of a child who was acquiring Malaysian English as her first language. The findings indicated that the hesitation features used were filled pauses, repetitions, substitutions, insertions, deletions, lengthening and pauses. Additionally, hesitation was used as a stalling device and a method of repairing an utterance. Sriniwass (2005) studied her sons and found that the development of pragmatic and mathetic functions serve as an impetus for lexicogrammar and dialogue development in young children. Kuang (2007) explored the linguistic development of the three languages that her three-year-old son was acquiring and found that her trilingual subject's two dominant languages were at developmental stage while the third language was in the initial stage of acquisition.

Having explored the studies of child conversation in both western and Malaysian contexts, the section now moves on to studies which focused on conversational topics.

2.9   Studies on the Conversational Topics of Preschoolers and Adults

While compiling information for this study, the researcher discovered another group of researchers from the medical field focusing on speech, language and hearing disorders, which produced a sizeable number of studies on conversational topic per se. These investigations included the conversational topics of children (Marvin et al., 1994), adults (Balandin & Iacono, 1998; Tönsing, 2001) as well as the elderly (Stuart, Vanderhoof & Beukelman, 1993) of western countries in various contexts. The findings contributed to the field of augmentative and alternative communication.

Marvin et al.'s (1994) research provided part of the framework of the current study. In their research, they explored the semantic content of the conversational topics used by 10 American children in home and preschool settings. Their findings revealed that the children referenced mainly to the "here and now" and to themselves, and the most common and frequent semantic referents at both home and preschool settings were similar and referred to events such as action, play and projects; objects such as toys and food; and ideas about people's traits and conditions. In an extended study, Marvin (1995) analysed the same group of preschoolers for the time referents addressed while at preschool, in the family car or at home. The study showed that their use of distant time referents were much more evident in transitional settings such as a moving car with a parent compared to the home and preschool settings.

Another study that also contributed to the current study's framework was conducted by Tönsing (2001), who studied the social conversation of the workplace. The social conversations of 12 South African employees in the Bindery and Printing Works departments in a university campus were analysed and the results showed that Present,

Self, Food, Interpersonal relations and Work were the most frequently referenced categories. Similarly, Balandin and Iacono (1998) analysed the conversational topics of 34 Australian employees in workplaces such as a family restaurant chain, government-controlled gambling organisation and a non-profit organisation during morning tea breaks, and patterns of topics associated with days of the week. They discovered that the most frequently referenced topics were Work, Fact finding, Judgements, Food and family, and that some topics were indeed associated with certain days of the week. Stuart, Vanderhoof and Beukelman (1993) investigated the topic and vocabulary use pattern of five elderly American women. They found that although the elderly women's topics comprised family life and social networks, the three youngest subjects frequently referenced the Present and Immediate families compared to the oldest who made more frequent references to the Past and Acquaintances as well as Close friends.

2.10   Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the history, method and findings related to the study of child conversational topics in western and Malaysian contexts. These studies have been valuable to the field of child language, particularly in featuring their oral language development and conversational skills.

The early researches in western countries (Vygotsky, 1971; Keenan, 1974; Nelson and Gruendel, 1979) disproved Piaget's notion of egocentrism among preschoolers and provided detailed insights on children's conversational competence such as their ability to use directives (Ervin-Tripp, 1977), to participate in verbal play (Garvey, 1984), to initiate topics (Foster, 1986) as well as their selection of conversational topics (Marvin et al., 1994; O'Neill et al., 2009). In Malaysia, researchers have contributed to the field

by their studies on preschoolers' topic maintenance and topic shifting skills (Wong and Thambyrajah, 1991), how they communicated meaning (Kow, 2003), their ability to answer wh-questions (Tan, 2003), their language and thought (Asmah Haji Omar, 2000), the types of hesitation present in their speech (Pillai, 2003), their lexicogrammar and dialogue development (Sriniwass, 2005) and their linguistic development (Kuang, 2007). These studies have contributed immensely in enhancing our understanding of preschoolers' oral language development and in paving the way for the proliferation of child language studies, especially in Malaysia. The following chapter elaborates on the methodology selected for this study.