

MALAY LANGUAGE AS A MEDIATOR FOR IDEA GENERATION AMONG STUDENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE GROUP ACTIVITY

Noor 'Izzati Ahmad Shafiai

*Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah, Kampus Sungai Petani
noorizzati@uitm.edu.my*

Abstract: Students' participation in discussions encourages idea exploration. However, it is challenging for low-proficient students to participate in an English language (L2) classroom. Using Sociocultural Theory as theoretical framework, this qualitative paper aims to explore how students with low English proficiency utilize Malay language (L1) as a mediator for idea generation in a discussion. Three low-proficient students and three students of mixed proficiency were given a one-hour English writing task. The study revealed that Malay language functioned as a mediator when the students presumed that by speaking in Malay, it may ease their speech production as well as message delivery. The outcome of this study does not only provide initial insights to low-proficient learners' option in getting their English tasks done, but also allows English instructors to reconsider strict restriction of the use of Malay in English learning.

Keywords: L1 mediation, idea generation, L2 group activity, low proficiency, sociocultural

1. Introduction

As part of the Ministry of Education's policy in transforming Malaysia into an international education hub for higher institutions within the Asian region (Ministry of Education, 2012), English is utilized as the main medium of instruction in the courses offered in most public universities and private colleges. Therefore, English teachers and instructors execute English-medium learning environment with almost non-existential context of Malay language. There are various methods recommended for English classrooms such as role play activity, question and answer (Q&A) session, the use of multimedia, language games, as well as objects and demonstrations (Roussol, 2010; Divya, 2012; Fgatabu, 2012). Games, signals, and penalty systems are developed to compel students to not rely on Malay language based on the notion that the utilization of Malay language impedes students' progress in mastering English language (Auerbach, 1993).

Past studies have shown that the debate whether non-English speakers should be allowed to use their L1 also occurs in other countries. Depending on the teachers' conviction and experience, certain teachers allow their students to depend on L1 whenever it is necessary while some necessitate English only without other languages during the lessons and expect the same from their students (Shabir, 2017; Nazary, 2008). In line with the latter, the survey conducted by Auerbach (1993) revealed that majority of the TESOL conference participants (80%) believed that ESL students should not be allowed to depend on L1 while 30% of them asserted that the reasons for using English only are due to their preferred choice of teaching method or school policy. Despite that, it remains challenging to successfully maintain an English-medium classroom. Auerbach (1993) further noted that 50% of these TESOL conference participants allowed the utilization of L1 as the final resort considering that students heavily depended on L1 since they did not comprehend the lessons taught in L2. Additionally, students were found to be less communicative in L2 compared to L1 (Carless, 2008). Such scenario is rather apparent in Malaysia, as revealed by Fauziah et al. (2009) where a student in a Malaysian primary school could not articulate his Mathematical strategy in English but fluently do so when using Malay.

These studies (Auerbach, 1993; Carless, 2008; Nazary, 2008; Fauziah et al., 2009; Shabir, 2017) revealed the typical challenge for both instructors and students particularly with low English proficiency level to participate in an English-medium classroom. Consequently, this limits students' participation in the classroom where active participation is necessary to provide an enabling environment for idea generation among these students. Perhaps, due to the need to participate and complete English tasks and activities, numerous English instructors have claimed the common utilization of students' L1 in English classrooms (Auerbach, 1993; Carless, 2008; Roussol, 2010). Hence, the main objective of this study is to explore how students utilize Malay language as a mediator in completing an English task in groups.

2. The Learners' Perspective on Using Malay Language in Learning English

The utilization of learners' first language (L1) in learning English has revealed encouraging responses based on many studies (Schweer, 1999; Tang, 2002; Dujmovic, 2007; Kavaliauskiene, 2009) conducted in various countries. For instance, majority (86%) of students in the University of Puerto Rico preferred the utilization of Spanish language in mastering difficult concepts and its utilization allowed them to be more at ease and assertive in English learning (Schweer, 1999). Similarly, among the 100 first-year English major university students in Beijing who participated in the study by Tang (2002), 72% revealed the utilization of Chinese language aided in their English learning particularly in grammar. In the intensity of English learning using Chinese language, 69% asserted that their first language did slightly assist them while 22% responded that it fairly helped. In another study, Croatian university students also responded positively towards the utilization of their own first language in English learning especially when it comes to complex grammar points (Dujmovic, 2007). Meanwhile, Kavaliauskiene (2009) highlighted that at tertiary level, the learners who utilize their L1 in learning English as well as translate ideas generated in their L1 thoughts into English were those at intermediate and low proficiency levels. Similar scenario could be found in Malaysia as well (Fauziah et al., 2009). With that, this addresses the need to explore the perspective of local university students in Malaysia towards the utilization of Malay language in English learning process. Reflecting on the results obtained by Fauziah et al. (2009), study on students taking English course in Malaysian universities may reflect similar results as well. However, since the previous studies were done quantitatively and merely on what the learners claim on the benefits of Malay language in learning English, this paper presents qualitative descriptions on how exactly Malay language mediates the process of learning English.

To summarize, the common attribute found in previous studies (Schweer, 1999; Tang, 2002; Dujmovic, 2007; Kavaliauskiene, 2009) is the utilization of L1 as a tool to comprehend complex grammatical points in L2 learning. Therefore, in relation to this study, limiting students particularly those with low proficiency level to utilize English-only approach in class would eventually obstruct their English learning process, including idea generation in a group discussion. Nonetheless, besides observing the utilization of Malay language (L1) in English (L2) learning, this study also explored how L1 was utilized as a mediator in L2 learning. Using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) as the theoretical framework, the utilization of L1 should be able to assist L2 learning among students in overcoming their zone of proximal development (ZPD). In other words, if L1 indeed functions as a mediator in L2 learning, it should be able to assist the students to improve their performance in L2.

3. Explaining Mediation in Sociocultural Theory

In a psychological context, the sociocultural theory (SCT) refers mediation as the utilization of a certain object or tool to play an auxiliary role in accomplishing a particular task (Vygotsky, 1978). Humans utilize these objects or tools and modify them to accommodate biological and behavioural activities, which in this context, these tools are speech and language while language use, organization, and structure are perceived as the primary means of mediation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This theory elucidates that second language learning requires complex interaction between the individual and the sociocultural context including means of mediation (Swain & Deters, 2007) as a source of mental development to overcome ZPD.

Being intermediate and advanced learners of second languages, they have adequate capability to engage in the complex interaction with the sociocultural context due to their higher proficiency level. However, learners with low English proficiency level have limited capability, which explains the tendency of utilizing the most accessible tool they have, which is L1, as a mediator to assist in their L2 learning process. Hence, this study focused on how Malay language as L1 was utilized to mediate the capability of performing L2 tasks among students with low English proficiency level.

4. Methodology

Considering that the social interaction is regarded as a mean of mediation in accomplishing a particular task (Vygotsky, 1978), this study selected group discussion as a data collection method to

observe any utilization of L1 as a mediator in L2 learning among the participants. Based on purposive sampling strategy, this study selected six diploma students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) with different English proficiency levels as the participants. Specifically, the English proficiency level among the participants was based on the grades obtained in an English course taken in the previous academic semester. It should be noted that it is compulsory for all diploma students in this public university to take up two English courses, namely the Consolidating Language Skills (BEL120) course in the first academic semester and the Intermediate English (BEL260) course in the subsequent academic semester.

4.1 Background of participants

With respect to the scope of this study, the selected participants were among the diploma students who were in BEL260 course and performed poorly in the previous BEL120 course during the period of sampling. For the BEL120 course, A+ is graded as the highest proficiency level while C is graded as the least proficiency level, which is the minimum requirement to take up the BEL260 course in the subsequent semester (Tam et al., 2010). Thus, this study considered students who obtained grade C in BEL120 course as students with low English proficiency level.

Group A comprised of three female students of 18 years of age, which were Amina, Balqis and Camilla (not real names for confidentiality reason). These students claimed that they practiced speaking English with their family members every now and then. This implied that they had opportunities outside the classroom to genuinely practice L2. However, their performance in the English course (BEL120) slightly differed from one another where Amina obtained grade B-, Balqis obtained grade B, and Camilla obtained C+.

Likewise, Group B also comprised of three female students of 18 years of age, which were Dahlia, Emma and Fatima (not real names for confidentiality reason). These purposively selected students shared a common attribute where they obtained grade C in the English course (BEL120). Therefore, this study assumed that these three students shared similar proficiency level in the English language. Nonetheless, Emma did not provide definite response regarding L2 at home. Meanwhile, Dahlia and Fatima confessed that they did not practice L2 at home. This implied that the only opportunity for them to practice L2 was in the classroom, specifically during the English classes. The summary of the participants' background and exposure to English is displayed below.

Table 1: Background of the participants

	Participant	BEL120 result	English at home
Group A	Amina	B-	Yes
	Balqis	B	Yes
	Camilla	C+	Yes
Group B	Dahlia	C	No
	Emma	C	*
	Fatima	C	No

Note: *The item was left unanswered by Emma.

4.2 Data collection procedure

Based on the classroom observation by Stough (2001), the data collection in this study proceeded with a group discussion among these selected participants, which was recorded in both audio and video formats for subsequent observation before proceeding to the stimulated recall interview. The lecturer who was assigned to conduct the English course (BEL260) identified potential participants based on an essay writing task in the first week of lecture where students were required to provide a self-introduction, their age, and their grade of previous English course (BEL120). Following that, the selected participants were assigned to complete an essay writing task within one hour without the presence of lecturer where the topic of the essay was extracted from the previous final English examination paper of the university. It should be noted that the participants were given extra time to complete the writing task if required. The instruction for the writing task is displayed in the following:

“University graduates are finding it difficult to get jobs because they lack good communication and interpersonal skills. Do you agree with this statement? State your opinion in not less than 350 words.”

4.3 Audio recorded observation

The group discussion session began with the distribution of the writing task to both groups without specifying which language they should utilize for the verbal discussion. A video camera facing towards the participants was set up at a distance to avoid distracting the participants throughout the group discussion. The video camera was utilized to capture the details of group discussion especially the participants’ non-verbal interactions, which may not be captured by the audio recorder. Meanwhile, the audio recorder was placed in the middle of the table where the participants gathered to obtain clear audio recording. The audio and video recordings were observed and analysed for the following session of stimulated recall interview.

4.4 Stimulated recall interview

Both groups were scheduled for stimulated recall interview in the subsequent week. The participants from both groups were provided with the video recording before the initiation of stimulated recall interview. Stimulated recall is a method for participants to recall their concurrent thinking process during a certain event using any form of visual or audio recording (Fox-Turnbull, 2009), which is obtained by the researcher and subsequently utilized during the interview session (Stough, 2001). For this study, the participants were prompted to pause the video recording at any time to provide any comment on their actions and interactions. In line with Stough (2001), the video recording was paused and participants were asked several open-ended questions when the participants did not provide any comment after two minutes of the video recording. The findings of this study were mainly based on the audio transcripts while the data obtained from the stimulated recall interview was used to clarify and/or validate participants’ actions and interactions throughout the group discussion.

5. Findings and Discussion

There had been observed occasions when L1 was used during oral discussion among the participants in both groups. Each of them had shown its purpose in order to reach the main objective of the writing task. However, this section will discuss two main purposes of the use of L1 during discussion, which are for ease of speech production and message delivery.

5.1 Ease of speech production

Another way in which L1 assists them in completing an L2 task is that it reduces the difficulty in speech production. Aoyama (2020) highlighted this problem among L2 learners in which the participants tend to ask how to say certain words in English. It goes back to vocabulary issues as well that somehow makes communication and expression of ideas difficult. When considering an L2 classroom activity in progress, usually a certain amount of time is allocated for students to complete the task. For those with limited L2 vocabulary, recalling some L2 terms just to have conversation is time consuming. It is simply natural for them to revert to L1 so that they could also contribute and finish the task on time.

This signified that the utilization of L1 assisted the participants to complete L2 writing task where it assisted in their speech production. Participants had the tendency to inquire in L1 to obtain specific words in L2, as reaffirmed by Aoyama (2020). This indicated the issue of vocabulary among participants, which limited their communication and idea expression. Below is an excerpt of the conversation among the participants in Group A to demonstrate this point:

1 Balqis: *Dia nak dia orang punya.. apa?*

(They want their... what’s the word?)

2 Camilla: Education. [Guessing Balqis’s point]

3 Balqis: *Bukan, bukan.*

(No, no.)

4 Amina: *Orang cakap...*

(They say...)

5 Balqis: *Bukan, macam.. alah kalau kita minta kerja kena.. requirement!*

(No, I mean... if we apply for a job we need... requirement!)

6 Amina: *Ha, requirement. [Saya] Nak cakap tu la. Kita, kita beritahu la. Penting tu.*

(Yes, requirement. That's what [I] wanted to say. We, we have to mention that. It's important.)

Based on the above excerpt, Balqis shared her thoughts on the requirements set by employers for fresh graduate job seekers. However, her delivery of thought was delayed for approximately seven seconds from the moment she spoke of this idea in line 1, until the moment she found the word 'requirement' to express her idea in line 5. Supposedly a duration of seven seconds is a considerable amount of time taken to recall a particular L2 word but it was not the case for Balqis. Just when she, seemingly, almost gave up in recalling the L2 word, and she tried to describe it in L1 instead, she finally managed to recall the word 'requirement' right before she had done describing it in L1. Balqis still encountered difficulty in expressing herself in L2 despite obtaining grade B in the previous English course. This implied that the other participants from Group B who obtained grade C in the similar course would have encountered higher difficulty in expressing their thoughts or ideas.

Interestingly, the search for words in L2 to provide the content for the writing task was only performed by participants from Group A. On the contrary, participants from Group B, whom are less proficient as compared to those in Group A, searched for words in L1 and translated them to complete the L2 writing task. These participants from Group B managed to engage in a continuous group discussion for main ideas. However, they experienced an abrupt pause when these ideas were to be translated into L2 for their writing task. Nazary (2008) revealed that 84% of those who sought for translation from L1 to L2 were, in fact, students with intermediate proficiency level while those with low proficiency level are less likely to seek for translation. Still, given that the result of Nazary's study was based on questionnaire survey, the type of situation that prompted these students with intermediate proficiency level to seek for translation and the reason why those with low proficiency level did not seek for such approach were not clarified.

Nonetheless, there may be a plausible rationalization for such scenario. Students with intermediate proficiency level are capable to engage spontaneous conversations in L2, including conversing with their peers in group discussion. They are likely to convert generated ideas from the group discussion into L2 writing task. On the other hand, students with low proficiency level are less capable to engage conversations in L2 due to their limited vocabulary range, which explains why L1 and L2 are utilized interchangeably whenever it is necessary. Students with low proficiency level are more likely to seek for L1 terms in L2 when they feel the urgency to complete the L2 task such as the L2 writing task in this present study. As asserted by Vygotsky (1978) in SCT, the comparison between students of different proficiency levels in this study reaffirmed that each individual has different actual developmental level despite the similar age. Students with lower proficiency level constantly depended on L1 to obtain extended vocabulary range in L2 for the similar L2 writing task between both groups. Therefore, the function of L1 as a mediator to develop higher mental function should be considered in L2 learning process.

Besides that, participants utilized L1 as a mediator to define unfamiliar L2 terms considering their limited vocabulary range in L1. In other words, L1 was regarded as a source of reference for these L2 students. In this study, participants defined 'interpersonal skills' in L1 to grasp the meaning of the term, which allowed them to have a focused group discussion with respect to the topic of their L2 writing task. Similar process was repeated when the participants came across other L2 terms, which were presumed to be related to the topic of their group discussion. Participants from Group B took the initiative to utilize available dictionary and reference books at the library for idea generation.

Apart from that, it could be observed that peer assistance in Malay language took place when participants from Group B encountered unfamiliar English terms. Participants attempted to translate these unfamiliar English terms into Malay, which assisted them in their evaluation of whether the term reflected what they wanted to express for English writing task. The entire process of idea generation,

which included identification of ideas, evaluation of ideas, and expansion of ideas, was assisted by their peers for participants to grasp the meaning of unfamiliar English terms. For example, in the following conversation among the participants from Group B:

7 Emma: *Ni apa?* (pointing at a word on the essay paper)

(What's this?)

8 Fatima: Talking with co-workers, *maksudnya kawan-kawan sekerja la. Kawan-kawan sekerja*, co-workers.

(Talking with co-workers, it means colleagues. Colleagues, co-workers.)

After a while, Emma used the English word that she had learned, but instead of saying 'co-workers', she mentioned 'workers', as shown in line 9.

9 Emma: Okay maintain a relationships with the workers.

10 Fatima: Ha, relationship with co-workers *kan?* Co-workers *pekerja kan?*

(Ha, relationship with co-workers, right? Co-workers means colleagues, right?)

In a learning process, making mistakes is common. 'Worker', as defined by Cambridge dictionary, is a person who works for a company or organization but does not have a powerful position, while 'co-worker' is a person who someone works with, especially with a similar job or level of responsibility. Fatima who possibly noticed the mistake made by Emma, corrected her indirectly by repeating the word with 'co-' this time, in line 10. Nearing the end of the discussion, Emma was finally able to use the word 'co-worker' in her speech as noted in line 11.

11 Emma: *Pasaran, pasaran sekarang dia nak memerlukan seseorang yang dia boleh.. ability dia dari segi* relationships with co-workers.

(The market, the current market needs someone who has.. the ability in terms of relationships with co-workers.)

The term 'co-workers' was frequently brought up in the group discussion and subsequently utilized as the main idea in English writing task once the participants realized the meaning of this term. This signified how the utilization of Malay defined unfamiliar English terms for participants to explore wider range of ideas. Additionally, the utilization of the term 'co-workers' instead of its Malay term throughout the group discussion implied that utilizing Malay as a mediator in English learning did not necessarily impede English learning process or encourage continuous utilization of Malay among students with low English proficiency level. With that, this proved that L1 could be utilized as a mediator in L2 learning for students with low proficiency level (Fauziah et al., 2009), which contradicted the notion that the utilization of L1 impedes L2 learning process (Auerbach, 1993; Thyab, 2016).

5.2 Ease of message delivery

In many times during the group discussions, both group A and B used Malay as their mode of communication. It can be observed that Malay functions as an alternative in case speaking in English prevented the other group members from getting the message that they tried to convey. In one example, as shown in line 4, Amina in group A was heard repeating 'interact' and even changed its form into a noun to persuade her friends to use that word. Her effort ended as soon as she translated it in Malay. When asked during stimulated recall interview, she thought the response by Balqis and Camilla indicate their uncertainty of the meaning of 'interaction'. After a few tries, she decided that translating it into Malay (despite term is very much alike) would help.

12 Amina: In universities, normally students must have good communication to interact.

13 Camilla: To interact?

14 Balqis: To interact *ke?* (Is it 'to interact'?)

15 Amina: To interact with other people *la*. Interaction. Interact. *Interaksi*. (Interaction)

Conclusively, this study revealed the significance of utilizing Malay in group discussion among students with intermediate and low proficiency levels for English learning. In particular, students with intermediate proficiency level utilized Malay to express their ideas to their peers while students with low proficiency level utilized Malay to deliver their idea as well as to grasp the meaning of the

unfamiliar terms and concepts in English, which expanded the scope of discussion. In short, the utilization of Malay, as a mediator, assisted learners to overcome ZPD in English learning.

6. Conclusion

Malay language functioned as a mediator when the participants presumed that their speech in English did not convey what they wanted to express, which assisted in their speech production and ensured continuous active participation. Meanwhile, participants from the group of mixed proficiency levels searched for words in English to provide content for the writing task while participant from the other group searched for words in Malay and translated them to complete the English writing task. In fact, defining unfamiliar English terms in Malay has enabled them to explore other range of ideas. Engaging these students in the context of Malay would provide opportunities for these students to explore ideas in English learning process. Therefore, it is pivotal to take into account the needs of students with low proficiency level for a mediator in their English learning process by assisting them through the mediating process whilst ensuring that these students do not become too dependent on Malay language.

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