

“NOT A SHIRT ON MY BACK, NOT A PENNY TO MY NAME”: AN INSIGHT ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LITERACY OF STREET ADOLESCENTS AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study examined the presence of dominant literacy and the pedagogical scaffolding in an English Language learning classroom of an alternative school in Malaysia. Focusing on street children, two questions were stipulated to guide the research process: (1) What are the dominant practices vis-à-vis English language literacy present during teaching and learning session? and (2) How does the facilitator provide scaffolding for the students in acquiring the dominant practices of English literacy?. An observation was conducted at the research site and the data gathered was thematically analysed using the operative paradigms of New Literacy Studies and Hegemony. Consequently, it was found that the alternative school's learning system showed an inclination towards autonomous practices. However, the scaffolding efforts made by the instructor managed to fairly bridge the knowledge gap between the education system and the students. This research therefore advocates that alternative school's teaching and learning process should remove itself from the autonomous shadow of mainstream schools. In order to provide a holistic and contextualised learning environment for its marginalised clients, there is a pivotal need to acknowledge their unique socio-cultural schemata. This could be accomplished by adding ideological approaches to the existing pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Literacy, alternative school, street children, marginalised community, autonomous paradigm, ideological paradigm

Introduction

In Malaysian media, street children are typically described in a negative light; usually portrayed as loitering school dropouts (Hamdan Raja Abdullah, 2007) who are stateless, unwanted (Daily Express, 2008; Dina Zaman, 2008), and unemployable (Bernama, 2008). They are also associated with immoral and taboo activities such as glue-sniffing and casual sex. Although these adversarial connotations might be true to a certain extent, they unfortunately do not tell the whole story of these marginalized adolescents: youths who are the offspring of today's complex urban realities (Roux, 1996). The truth is, street children face a myriad forms of violation which ranges from "child labor, sex work, running for drug dealers, neglect, abuse, pornography, mumps, chicken pox, rubella, skin afflictions and, yes, sexually transmitted diseases" (Dina Zaman, 2008, p. 1). The reality faced by these children daily leave very little time or use for formal learning (Levinson, 2007). In addition, the mainstream education could also pose as a threat to those who are living without legal residential permit or/and engage in unlawful activities such as drug-dealing and prostituting (Bernama, 2008). Most parents of the marginalised group fear that their identity, illegal profession and residential status could be discovered once their children enter government establishments. This situation, however, contradicts the Education Act which clearly spells out that children must receive education until they are 17 years old (Daily Express, 2007) and failure of parents to do so would be taken in as an offence. The Malaysian Government has also stressed on a greater need for at-risk adolescents to be schooled (Education Act, 1996); as they are regarded to be potential "trouble makers" (Hamdan Raja Abdullah, 2007). Sending them to mainstream government schools is expected to keep them out of trouble and provide them with some basic skills of literacy and living (Nettleton, 2011).

The mainstream education system in Malaysia has not managed to successfully sow the interest in learning among the at-risk adolescents, let alone encourage them to go to school daily. An article written by Singh (2007) for Al Jazeera news revealed that an 11-year old son of a sex worker refused to go to school after attending it for quite some time. The reason underlying his reluctance was the taunting and bullying he received from his teachers and school mates. Shakila Yaakob (2006) pointed out that the above situation occurred mainly because in the education system, a "Malaysian nation" is usually portrayed by Malay, Indian and Chinese Malaysians who belong to either middle or upper middle socio-economic group. The overt exclusivity of such images creates an assumption that there is no room left for a fourth group of "Malaysians": immigrants and members of various marginalised groups whose background is "coloured" by socially-scorned taboos. As such, the adolescents of these marginalised communities would not be accepted by their mainstream counterpart. Consequently, they will be treated invisibly in public domains such as classroom, but ironically made to feel very "visible" outside these domains due to their cultural, social and personal identity.

Another dominant cultural practice of the education system which potentially garnered at-risk adolescents' negative reaction towards education is the autonomous take on literacy in Malaysian classrooms (Koo, 2010), especially English

language literacy. The system restricts the marginalised adolescents' access to English literacy by persistently placing pedagogical overemphasis on writing and reading skills (Koo, Kaur, & Siti Hamin Stapa, 2011). Through this teaching method, these students are also taught to read and write in a manner which is rule-adhering and decontextualized from their cultural and social bearings. Being street children, these youths receive minimal mainstream English literacy exposure from their parents, television, the Internet as well as books. Without scaffolding at home, their only contact with English language is at schools; which is unfortunately insufficient for them.

One distinctive effort made by the education system in recognition of at-risk adolescents' socio-cultural schema is the setting up of special schools such as Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu (Vanar, 2009) and school programs which are specially-tailored for them. The students of these schools/programmes share the same socio-cultural background and are taught by specially-trained teachers so no one is discriminated during the teaching and learning process (Singh, 2007). However, these schools and programmes echo the current paradigm underpinning mainstream curriculum especially pertaining to literacy: emphasis is still being put on the three Rs – writing, reading and arithmetic and vocational skills such as boat making and carpentry (Nettleton, 2011; Sario, 2011). The compartmentalisation of knowledge shown by the system alludes to the education system during the colonial period; whereby village folks were taught rural-based education and urban dwellers were exposed to the dominant literacies. As a result, village folks remained to be farmers and fishermen while dominant education system churned local government and private sector officers (Hazita Azman, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

In the light of the above arguments, the purpose of this study therefore is to examine the presence of dominant literacy and pedagogical scaffolding in an English learning classroom of an alternative school for street children. This research was guided by two questions namely:

1. How are the dominant practices vis-à-vis English language literacy reflected in the process of teaching and learning?
2. How does the facilitator provide scaffolding for the students in acquiring the dominant practices of English literacy?

Theoretical framework

Literacy and new literacy studies

In its traditional sense, being literate specifically means possessing the unitary skill (Hazita Azman, 2009) of decoding print texts (Larson & Marsh, 2005). In this autonomous model, literacy is regarded as an independent variable; making it relatively easy to be the quantitative measure for economic symbols such as

progress, social mobility and economic stability. The aforementioned stand is however contested by Gee (2000) and his contemporaries such as Street (2001) and the members of the New England Group (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008) who contend that literacy is no longer as straightforward as providing uniform technical skills to those who lack them. Realistically, literacy especially in the 21st century exists in multiple forms and has become socio-culturally situated (Street, 2001). This realisation gives rise to a new literacy paradigm called New Literacy Studies (Street, 2001); which offers an 'ideological view' and socio-cultural approach on literacy components. In explaining this new literacy paradigm, Street (2001) posited literacy (and literacy practices) to be "always 'embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles'" (p. 7). It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being". On this basis, acts such as reading a bedtime story to a child or writing a thank-you card, for instance, are considered as much of a *literacy event* as learning English in a language classroom.

Literacy and the theory of hegemony

The ideological view of literacy is also related to the sphere of hegemony; a deduction made based on the knowledge that language is instrumental in constituting and expressing power relations (Perry & Purcell-Gates, 2005). Perry and Purcell-Gates further explained that this theory believes that power inequality which exists in societies leads to the exercise of power by the mainstream groups over their non-mainstream counterpart. Such act utilises mind-controlling technique instead of overt manipulation to dominate others. Van Dijk (2003) described the "others" who form the "dominated group" as:

1. trained to accept belief, knowledge and opinions of authoritative and trustworthy sources such as academic personnel and mainstream media such as newspapers, and
2. conditioned to accept institutional ideologies such as school's literacy view, and not knowledgeable enough to fight against the mainstream group.

The imposition of certain literacy values on the Bangladeshis as reported by Blackledge (2001) is an excellent example of hegemonic power in education setting. It was found through the research that Bangladeshis were made to think that their own literacy practices were inadequate to be used in their current context. Instead, they needed to take up the literacy practices of the dominant groups if they wished to be accepted into their new reality. Taking the finding into account, it is clear that hegemony in literacy leads to the hierarchical distribution of power in the academic setting and fosters compliance from the marginalised groups (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2006).

In another study conducted by Pirbhai-Illich (2010) on aboriginal students, an alternative school which was tailored-made for children of marginalised background in Canada failed to generate interest in learning among the aboriginal adolescents. The reason for its failure was the school's ideology imposition - on the

students and authoritative dictation on students' learning styles and interests as well as blatant ignorance of the students' socio-cultural make-up. In other words, the hegemonic efforts made by Canadian mainstream schools in sustaining autonomous literacy notions created conflicts of identity in the marginalised students – eventually encouraging their complete disengagement from the education system.

Methodology

Prior to data collection, the researchers firstly searched for available information regarding at-risk adolescents in several newspapers and journal articles. Using purposeful sampling, the researchers chose street children attending a particular alternative school as the participants and research site in order to gain a full understanding of the students' literacy practice. Next, the researchers sought the permission of an administrator of the alternative school in order to get access to the research site. The proposal of this study was then sent to the administrator via e-mail. Once the permission was granted, the researchers went to the site on 8 December 2011 and collected the data through focus group observation. The researchers took upon the role of a non-participant in order to minimise the effect of their presence on the learning process.

Data were also gathered using a camera, a phone camera, and a walkman recorder – totalling the duration of both audio and video data to three hours and a half. However, only one hour and fifteen minutes of video data proved to be meaningful and worthy of transcription. Seven participants consisting of five street students (age around 8 to 13 years old), one teacher, and one teacher-trainee were present during the observation. However, the teacher-trainee was not reported in the finding because his role in the class was merely that of an observer. It must also be highlighted that the teacher is a product of the English language literacy programme adapted by the school. Demographically, he came from a similar socio-economic background as the students; with the exception that he was marginalised because he belonged to a minority race, as opposed to being on the street.

Results and Discussion

A closer look into the data obtained revealed two major themes: (1) dominant literacy practices displayed during the English language teaching and learning process; and (2) facilitator's scaffolding efforts.

Autonomous versus ideological literacy practices

On the basis of the findings, it could be inferred that the dominant practices *vis-a-vis* English language literacy pedagogy, even in a non-mainstream context such as the alternative school is still autonomous in nature. The first evidence is the use of the

words “cars” and “houses” which are typically utilised when teaching and learning grammar components such as plural-singular and adjective. Some examples of their usage in the research site were “Yes ... her car is the blue one” and “So, my house is the black one...the red one...the blue one”. The problem with the usage of these concepts in an alternative classroom is their association with the middle and high class culture and their minute relevance to the street children’s reality. More familiar concepts would be squatter area, wet market, stalls, living conditions such as communal living (as opposed to apartment or white terrace houses) and part-time working people such as tourist as well as unconventional literacies such as peddling, waiting tables, and begging. An effort of tapping into the student’s social reality was detected only once, when the teacher made a reference to “bosses”. The children could clearly relate to having ‘bosses’ as their current reality revolves around individuals who are consistently working (see Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1

The addition of street children socio-cultural schemata to teaching and learning session

T: Ok, Amy, so, which are their bosses? Bosses..boss, you know.. boss tu ar.. majikan la. Bosses..[*bosses, you know, they are employers*]

S: Their...their bosses are the

T: Ok, now... bila kita cakap tentang seorang ar..boss,apa punya karakter dia? [*When we talk about a person, how would we describe their characteristics?*]

S: *Asking a friend* Sombong dalam Bahasa Inggeris, apa? [*What is arrogance in English*]

T: Arrogant

S: ...the arrogant ones.

T: Yes...

S: Angry ones

As such, although most aspects of the street children’s reality are unconventional as compared to normal children, alternative schools’ curriculum should still provide a holistic education environment for them by being culturally-inclusive and student-oriented. Particularly, the system should tap into the students’ socio-cultural make-up, extract its essence and then add it *positively* into the curriculum. Pirbhai-Illich (2010) proved the success of the aforementioned method. By positively incorporating themes familiar to her at-risk research participants such as gangsterism and their interests such as computer gadgets, she achieved a full class attendance for almost a month. One important concern of not acknowledging the students’ background is their negative attitude towards education, particularly their reluctance and low self motivation to go to school or obtain any form of education. This concern is proven to be highly pertinent by the research conducted by Pirbhai-Illich (2010), Hazita Azman (2009), Koo (2010), Normazidah Che Musa, Koo, and Hazita Azman (2012), who reported similar damaging outcome of decontextualized learning.

The second autonomous aspect of the alternative classroom is the teacher's pedagogical techniques which consisted largely of the traditional method of Grammar Translation method (GTM) (Brown, 2006; Leela Mohd Ali, 1989). Repetitive drillings, memorisation and recall of grammar rules which belong to the GTM pedagogical mechanism were also eminently noticed (see Excerpts 2 and 3).

Excerpt 2

An example of repetitive drilling pedagogical method

T: So, my girlfriend is the attractive one.

S: The beautiful one.

Excerpt 3

An example of repetitive drilling and grammar rule recall pedagogical method

T: Her sisters...are...beautiful

T: Ha...(pointed to the article on the board) where is your article?

S: Her sisters are the... beautiful ones

Although it is evident from the excerpt that the students were able to use the said grammar rule, the focus on form rather than meaning is feared to lead to their inability to apply the same linguistic rule on other contexts. Unlike learning science subjects such as Physics, formulaic learning could not be carried out for language acquisition. Juxtaposed against the multimodality of language usage in the 21st century such as the use of language in various new contexts, students should be able to use their linguistic resources intelligently to match the contact space.

The other danger in carrying out GTM in teaching is its emphasis on accuracy as opposed to fluency. In the case of the above excerpt, while the students could accurately imitate the rule using their own input, this does not display their fluency in the language. Their inaccurate responses to the teacher's autonomous way of teaching were without the addition of input from their own literacy reality. This conjectured their ability to accurately regurgitate rules, not their fluency in the English language. Fluency in this sense is much related to the understanding of meaning; where a speaker is deemed to be fluent in a language if the speaker could use the said language and all of its linguistic-rule underpinnings correctly across various contexts (Ellis, 2006). This feat could only be achieved if the aforesaid speaker has a clear understanding of the target language's rules.

The final Grammar Translation approach identified was the act of directly translating the English language or L3 using a language which the students commonly used, namely, the "street Malay" variety or informal Bahasa Malaysia. English is considered as L3 or the third language due to the fact that these children originated from various countries (Tan, 2006); hence there is a high possibility that their mother tongue is that of their native country such as Indonesian language, Urdu, or Tagalog.

The use of another language to assist the teaching and learning process of a target language is also common in mainstream education, especially in weaker classrooms (Mohd Sofi Ali, 2003). It is however a much debated and controversial issue in the pedagogical world (Brown, 2006; Howatt, 2004) whereby as a practice,

direct translation is frowned upon by many ESL practitioners, such as Brown (2006) and Mohd Sofi Ali (2003). In his paper, Mohd Sofi Ali expressed his concern over the use of Malay language in teaching English because he believed that teacher's language in classroom had a modelling effect on the pupils. Mohd Sofi Ali also argued that the failure of using English language only during English lessons would not only affect students' proficiency in the language, but reduced students' exposure to the many ways in which English could be used. From another angle however, the use of L1 could be regarded as a scaffolding method (Brown, 2006; Leela Mohd Ali, 1989), especially for weak students. Weak students usually do not have contact with the language outside classroom context so teaching English using the language per se might confuse them – or in some cases, lead to minimal learning in class on the students' part. As for the participants in this study, the heavy use of direct translation method had successfully assisted their learning process since they received little exposure to the English Language in their living environment. If the teacher had chosen to mediate the class fully in English, there would be a high possibility that these street children would end up not learning anything or lose interest in attending the session. The success of this method is demonstrated in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4

Use of L3 in assisting English language learning

- T: Ok kalau kita tengok marker, apa dia punya adjective, dan apa dia punya saiz. Tak boleh nak cakap, handsome, or...beautiful. You just put the colour, ok. So, you must padankan, must be logic,ok. [*Ok now let's look at markers-and the adjectives suitable for it such as size (big, small). We cannot use handsome or beautiful to describe it. If you wished to use colour then it's alright. But when you match the adjectives with the objects remember it must be logical*] So, you must to find another answer. Ok, just now your answer is black, right? Ok. Halijah, which are his markers?
- S4 : His marker...
- T : Ha?
- S4 : His markers are the.....blue ones.
- T : The..
- S4 : Blue ones.
- T : blue ones... Yes, very good.

The use of informal Bahasa Malaysia was a clever ideological move on the part of the teacher as he had reiterated solidarity with the children by drawing from the students' existing resources (Brown, 2006). At the same time, he also eased the learning of a foreign language for them. *Ease* in this context refers to the use of a familiar language to teach a foreign language such as English in an effort to make it appear less intimidating and difficult. The excerpt above clearly demonstrates the students' successful application of the rule taught to them mostly using informal Bahasa Malaysia. Despite *translation* being a part of the Grammar Translation Method, the use of informal Bahasa Malaysia facilitating literacy learning could also be considered as one of facilitator's successful scaffolding efforts in aiding students' understanding. It is also important to highlight that scaffolding efforts such as direct translation of languages have also managed to dilute or neutralise the syllabus' autonomous underpinnings.

Facilitator's scaffolding efforts

Besides the use of informal Bahasa Malaysia, the facilitator also employed several other scaffolding methods, such as incorporating songs into the teaching and learning session. This was done specifically to improve the students' speaking and writing skills. Other rhythmic materials were also included as to enhance student's knowledge especially in terms of vocabulary and word meaning. The use of both types of materials was a clever tactic to draw interest to learning because the materials inject an element of fun into language pedagogy, turning learning into an exciting experience. Conversely, two drawbacks were identified during the implementation of the pedagogy, the first one being its autonomous manner of execution. For instance, the students were required to copy down the song lyrics before eventually singing it out loud together. They were also drilled to memorise the meaning of the difficult words in the lyrics. Some of these words belonged to the mental lexicon of a more advanced learner, inadvertently mismatching the students' own proficiency level. This condition resulted in the students' inability to use the words meaningfully post lesson. Additionally, some of the words learned were figurative language and poetic devices – and the scaffolding given by the teacher was providing the students with dictionary meanings of these words. This created a knowledge gap for the students. As such, it was noticed that they reverted to using informal Bahasa Malaysia, added with minimal spattering of simple English language words such as “boring”, “teacher” and “pencil case” when interacting with each other, including their teacher.

The two shortcomings explicated above stemmed from the aim of the scaffolding process itself which was to help students acquire English literacy per se. The language therefore was taught and learned in isolation and devoid of the students' socio-cultural literacy. A lucid evidence of this circumstance is the songs sung by the students. The level of language used was too sophisticated for the young learners. This occurred because the songs were selected by the authors of the syllabus, not by the teacher or the students themselves. The songs also contained frequent references to western elements which were very foreign to the socio-cultural experiences of the students. As a result, the children did not add or display

their own literacy practices during the learning session. Instead, the literacy practices they displayed echoed the teacher's teaching and scaffolding practices such as memorisation of song lyrics without knowing the meaning of most of the words. Given the opportunity, these children would have enjoyed the lesson more if the songs resembled more of their cultural reality. This claim was evidenced in one observation where during break time, the teacher willingly played the guitar to any song the students wanted. They were so excited that they forgot about recess – requesting instead for their favourite songs to be played. While most of these songs were in the Malay language, there were also several requests made for English songs sung by teenage pop idol, Justin Bieber. This finding foreshadows the high probability that if the students' socio-cultural reality was met by the learning system, the literacy programme would experience more success in generating all-rounded literate students.

The third scaffolding method identified was the teacher's pedagogical techniques. As repeatedly highlighted earlier, traces of the autonomous paradigm were prominent in the previous scaffolding methods discussed. However, the teacher neutralised the impact of these autonomous pedagogical methods by adopting the ideological voice during teaching and learning process. Since he came from a more or less similar background as the children, the teacher was very culturally sensitive when interacting with them. As a facilitator, he was both warm and understanding. For instance, when one student entered the class late on the account of staying up till dawn to help his or her mother at work, he did not scold or seek an explanation but merely assisted the student in catching up with the rest of the class. When they were unable to relate to some parts of the lesson, he would simplify his explanation and draw examples from the student's repertoire of socio-cultural experience. He knew when to use informal Bahasa Malaysia; which was during the grammar part of the lesson. Out of his own initiative, he sacrificed his break time so that the children could sing their favourite songs. The efforts he made to bridge the gap for the students is believed to be the most successful among all other scaffolding techniques detected during the short observation.

Conclusion

In view of the earlier discussions, it could be summed up that while this particular alternative school did aid street children in dominant literacy acquisition, this effort was executed autonomously. The role of the teacher who was inter-culturally sensitive seemed to have played the biggest role in bridging the gap between the students' social-cultural reality and the values imposed via dominant English language literacy. The imposition was done using (1) the syllabus which contains preselected knowledge perceived by the school as important (in the case of this research the aspect focused was grammatical rules) and (2) 'pedagogical techniques' which Bordieu (as cited in Kelder, 1996) claimed to be an act of strengthening an already solid and one-sided dominant literacy. In addition to that, Street (2005) pointed out due to the "uncontested power" bestowed to the dominant English language literacy, the dominant English Language Literacy automatically is given the

right to dictate the standards and criteria of what qualifies one to be literate and what is considered appropriate to be a discourse. Consequently, non-mainstream learners such as the street children in question would find it hard to gain access to mainstream English language discourse, let alone be accepted into the mainstream community. This occurs because they are already demographically unacceptable; thus their existing literacies would never be acknowledged to be part of literacy. This unfortunately takes place when the literacies in question are the very set of knowledge which could aid the children in gaining mainstream literacy abilities.

On the part of the research participants, they were bright and eager young minds – if they were “polished” in a holistic manner, they would not end up being the “pests” of the society; as some of them are labelled now. Their inaccessibility to literacy, or in the case of this research, English language literacy were the fact that they were poor, illegal, and marginalised by the masses and living in a non-conducive environment, academic-wise. If the education system could add an ideological resonance to their literacy continuum – accomplished by using the at-risk adolescents’ existing literacies to empower them educationally, there is doubt that the vicious cycle these children are running around in could be broken. On this note, the key player to this change is the alternative schools – as not only they have the most access to at-risk adolescents such as street children, but they are probably the only legal bodies which this group of people trust. The truth is, the story of these children does not have to bear the same plot as their parents’ or reflect the lyrics of the song they sang in class: “500 miles, 500 miles, 500 miles, 500 miles Lord I’m five hundred miles from my home, Not a shirt on my back, not a penny to my name”. In order to break the wall of marginalisation and vicious cycle which they are currently trapped in, these children need acknowledgement of their struggle, empathy, and empowerment aids, especially from the mainstream community.

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