

English Is Natural, Yet Challenging: Teachers' Perspectives and Practices on English Acquisition among Asian Learners

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the New Zealand early childhood teachers' perspectives and practices on English acquisition among Asian English language learners (ELLs). The theoretical framework of this research draws on sociocultural perspectives. The main participants of this study were seven early childhood teachers and six Asian immigrant ELLs from two ECE centres. Research methods included observations and semi-structured pre- and post-observation interviews. The findings revealed that there were dissonances between the teachers' perspectives and their practices. While the teachers viewed that the Asian ELLs would naturally acquire English due to its dominant role in the early childhood setting, there were challenges both on the teachers' and Asian ELLs' part. This study provides a basis from which to consider how early childhood teachers in New Zealand better support ELLs as they acquire English, while valuing and supporting their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Key words: Early childhood • English language learners • Sociocultural • Qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand is increasingly becoming more diverse in language and culture as a result of immigration. This, in turn, increases the diversity in children's enrolment in early childhood education (ECE) settings. The increase in enrolments of immigrant children seems to have posed great challenges to early childhood education services when it comes to supporting children's second language acquisition [1]. Young children's second language acquisition is not simply a static outcome, but an ongoing dynamic process in which each child develops along a unique continuum towards achieving English proficiency [2]. During this process, the early childhood teachers' support is crucial to ensure successful English acquisition [3, 4, 5].

English dominance in New Zealand early childhood centres describes a phenomenon that is associated with how teachers supported English Language Learners (ELLs) as they acquired English. As English was the medium of instruction in both the ECE centres, most teachers directly stated in the interviews that the ELLs acquired English naturally and that an emphasis should rather be given to their home language. However, there is

complexity in providing support to English Language Learners (ELLs) as teachers may have their own perspectives with regard to English acquisition for immigrant ELLs and the teachers' perspectives may or may not be predictors of their practices.

The objective of this study is to explore the perspectives and practices of New Zealand early childhood teachers in supporting English acquisition among Asian immigrant ELLs. The focus of the study is on analysing early childhood teachers' perspectives about how they can support English acquisition among Asian immigrant ELLs and how these perspectives influence their practice in the early childhood education setting.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative multi case study was deemed the most appropriate design as it aligns with the aim of this study, which is to investigate a phenomenon regarding teachers' perspectives and practices in two ECE centres to support English acquisition for ELLs. According to [6] multicase study is not a design for comparing cases. Instead, the cases studied are "a selected group of instances chosen

for better understanding of the quintain” (p. 83). It is instrumental study extended to several cases (Stake, 2006) and involves collecting and analysing data from several cases [7]. The main participants of this study were seven early childhood teachers and six Asian immigrant ELLs from two ECE centres.

For individual case study analysis, three steps were involved which were in line with thematic analysis. The first step was to review the transcripts and field notes to get a sense of early childhood teachers’ perspectives and practices in supporting English acquisition among ELLs. The second step of the data analysis was to scrutinise the data to develop preliminary codes for clustering around topics. The final stage of the data analysis was to discover the themes. The names of the themes were selected so the readers would easily understand what it meant in the context of the findings of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers’ Practices on Natural Acquisition of English:

In an English dominant environment, it was expected for the majority of the ELLs to acquire English through listening and watching their teachers and English speaking peers. Most of the Asian immigrants did not interact as much as their English speaking peers but they seemed to be picking up words and phrases used by their peers and teachers by listening and watching how and when these words and phrases were used contextually. From the observation, some of the Asian immigrant ELLs used some of the words and phrases in their English speech. This scenario was depicted in the field notes and in the observation videos:

It was a beautiful autumn day. As I looked around the centre, the leaves were beginning to change colours into the reds and oranges of the season. The cool breeze scattered the leaves in all directions. Rosalind, a bilingual teacher, joyfully raked the leaves while singing an ‘Autumn’ song:

Autumn leaves are falling, falling to the ground.
Autumn leaves are falling, yellow, red and brown. Falling,
falling and falling to the ground. Falling, falling yellow,
red and brown. Pick them up and gather in a pretty bunch.
Autumn leaves are falling in the parks they crunch.

Seo-yeon (a case study child of the first centre) was watching Rosalind with full interest despite the background noise of the children playing nearby. Rosalind noticed Seo-yeon was watching her and asked whether he would like to help Rosalind rake the leaves.

Seo-yeon nodded his head and held the rake that Rosalind was using. Rosalind asked him, “Would you like to use the rake?” Seo-yeon repeated the word “rake”. Rosalind got another rake from the store-room for Seo-yeon. They raked the leaves together and Rosalind started to sing the “Autumn” song again. Immediately, Seo-yeon repeated some of the lyrics after Rosalind such as “falling, falling, falling to the ground”. Rosalind stopped, looked at Seo-yeon and complimented Seo-yeon’s singing, “that was a nice song, wasn’t it?” Seo-yeon smiled broadly, looking very happy and continued raking the leaves while singing some parts of the song with Rosalind. Rosalind picked some dried leaves and crushed them while singing the part “autumn leaves are falling, in the parks they crunch”. Seo-yeon repeated the word “crunch” while matching the exact action of Rosalind’s. Then he said, rather loudly to himself, “Coco crunch”.

The brief scenario between Rosalind and Seo-yeon illuminated how natural it was for Seo-yeon to listen, watch and later imitate Rosalind’s actions and words. There were two sociocultural concepts which were evident in the scenario: firstly, scaffolding and secondly, conceptual knowledge. Scaffolding and conceptual knowledge are important concepts in sociocultural perspectives which are related to second language acquisition. Scaffolding and conceptual knowledge are important concepts in sociocultural perspectives which are related to second language acquisition. Learners first need the help of experts in order to ‘scaffold’ them into the next developmental stages before they can appropriate the newly acquired knowledge [8]. This is seen as an essentially social process, in which interaction plays a central role, not as a source of input, but as a medium for development [9].

An example of conceptual knowledge from the scenario was when Rosalind crunched dry leaves while she was singing the part, “Autumn leaves are falling, in the parks they crunch”. The conceptual knowledge for Seo-yeon was that, the word “crunch” might not necessarily be used for leaves when they were dry but also food as in “Coco crunch”, a breakfast cereal which is popular among children. In this scenario, Seo-yeon was not only learning two things, a new concept as well as a new language, but also discovering that the English word “Crunch” can be used in something he already knew. The fact that Seo-yeon said “Coco Crunch” to himself reflected Vygotsky’s idea that children solve problems with their speech and they talk aloud to guide their

thinking process. Vygotsky argued that young children appropriate concepts of tools and objects through

interaction with more experienced adults. In addition, [8] claimed that everyday concepts were most prominent. Everyday concepts which emerged from children's thinking about daily experiences occurred naturally as the children participated in family and community activities[5]. It was evident that Seo-yeon learned about the word "Crunch" through interactions with Rosalind, not through formal instruction, but through interaction which was spontaneous and natural.

Therefore, it was important to note in the scenario between Seo-yeon and Rosalind, that scaffolding and conceptual knowledge were evident through the interactions, in a natural manner. Seo-yeon's inclination to participate in the activity and subsequently to acquire some contextual English words was observed to be without conscious learning but as a result of listening and interacting with Rosalind. Rosalind seemed to focus more on the communicative aspect of the language rather than on just rules and patterns for Seo-yeon to repeat and memorize. Therefore, Seo-yeon seemed to acquire English through a source of natural communication with the support of Rosalind.

Teachers' Perspectives on Natural Acquisition of English: Rosalind's comments about the scenario with Seo-yeon highlights her perspectives:

It was really nice to see how Seo-yeon was first watching me and then there were bits of learning there. Seo-yeon is always curious about things and I think that curiosity leads him to explore many things, which benefits him especially as he doesn't speak English very much. He learns how to socialise and pick up some English words during that socialisation process. I hope we will have more of this kind of opportunity so that I can interact more with Seo-yeon.

The dominance of English in the ECE centres has been seen to influence the teachers' perspectives and practices in supporting ELLs' English acquisition. Most of the teachers, particularly who were native speakers of English, argued that these children picked up English naturally because they were in an environment where English is spoken by majority of the children, who were also native speakers. Comments made by these teachers such as "these children pick up English quickly", "they are going to take English on board" and "everybody speaks English here and "they will somehow speak English like the rest" reflected some of the teachers' perspectives that the acquisition of English by the ELLs was a process which happened naturally while they attended ECE centres.

During an interview with one of these teachers, Heather was asked to describe what she meant by saying that English acquisition was natural and her response was:

Well, these [ELLs] children will develop their English when they interact with the teachers and friends, the native speakers of English. They will learn basic words to interact with us. They pick up main words, may not be grammar yet, but as long as they use basic English words first to communicate. I think that is a natural process. You don't drill them to interact with others. It is unnatural. But you help them when they need your help.

Heather's perspective was reflected in her practice when working with ELLs. From the observations of some of her practices, she usually let the ELLs explore their own ways of acquiring English while giving support when there was a need to do so. For instance, Heather was watching Hyun-woo (a case study child of the first centre) playing at the sand pit with an English speaking child, Jack. Hyun-woo used simple words when he interacted with Jack such as "Look" and "It's cool" and Jack sometimes extended a few more phrases. Heather did not interfere with their play. She only explained when Hyun-woo went to her and asked her questions like "What's this?" When I asked Heather to describe her thoughts of the video footage recording this episode, her response was that she was providing words that Hyun-woo needed in that context of his play so that he could make contextual association between words and objects. Heather's explanation demonstrated her understanding of the natural way to acquire English: the child speaks when he feels like doing so because it is only natural if the need is not forced by anyone.

On the contrary, the bilingual teachers viewed that the ELLs still needed facilitation from the teachers to interact with English speaking children and teachers. Two of these Asian bilingual teachers, Akiko and Ming, viewed that their children still needed facilitation from the teachers to interact with English speaking children and teachers. They voiced their concerns on the limitations of the ELLs in their access to the kinds of interactions that would support the ELLs' English acquisition. The limitations emphasised by the teachers were mainly due to the ELLs' English proficiency. Akiko shared her view:

I think language, because we had a Chinese boy; he was playing with Pâkehâ child all the time, because he has very good English. I also think some children prefer to play with someone who looks like them. Maybe they feel comfortable. I'm not sure but I think language is the biggest barrier.

Similarly, Ming also argued that while language can serve as an opportunity for the ELLs to communicate, it can also be a barrier if they do not speak the same language as English speaking children. However, Ming understood the difficulty of not being able to communicate in English and felt that it was her responsibility to help the ELLs:

Sometimes language gives us the chance and the opportunity to communicate with each other. But sometimes I think language is a barrier that creates a distance from people, because we speak a different language. Then we think we cannot communicate with each other. So I can understand how children find it difficult to communicate with each other in English if their first language is not English at home. So I try to help them or as much as I can to try to use English to help them to express their ideas, or what they want.

In the context of English being a dominant language at the ECE centres, Ming and Akiko appeared to demonstrate their perspectives about acquisition of English for the ELLs is embedded in social interactions with their friends and teachers. Moreover, Ming and Masaru reflected their experiences of being bilinguals and also having their own children who struggled to acquire English when they first attended ECE centres and schools respectively. While Ming agreed that the ELLs would acquire English naturally, yet it was not without struggle, particularly when there was no opportunity for them to interact with their English speaking friends:

I know the Asian children will pick up English eventually because after attending the ECE centre, they will go to school. These places [ECE centres and school] will make them English speakers. But, based on my experience as a bilingual and my child was a bilingual too, we had tough times, though. If you cannot speak English, not many children want to play with you, right? When you don't play along with the native speakers, you don't use English that much. How can you pick up English when you don't use it?

In her interview, Ming highlighted that even in the English dominant environment, where English naturally became the medium of interactions, the ELLs still struggled to acquire English naturally. Ming emphasised that the ELLs needed support and opportunities to participate in interactions. From my observations, however, the teachers did not deliberately make the effort to ensure there were opportunities for interactions between the ELLs and the English speaking children. It was evident that most of the time the children chose who they wanted to play with and the teachers seemed not to

intervene with the children's choice. The ELLs who were able to use English for their interactions seemed to have more opportunities to engage in interactions with the English speaking friends. In contrast, the ELLs who had limited proficiency in English seemed to be playing with each other. Therefore, it was evident that even though Ming argued in her interview that the ELLs did not get many opportunities to interact with their English speaking peers because of their limited English proficiency, there were no significant evidence that the teachers encouraged the ELLs and the English speaking friends to interact and play together.

The language barrier did limit the access to interaction which could support the ELLs to acquire English naturally. However, the ELLs were observed and listened a lot to interactions that were going on among their peers and the teachers. While the second language learners are not able to use English in their interaction, they observe and listen to interactions in English, which are their natural source of information of how English can be used in appropriate contexts. Tabor argued that while the second language learners are not able to use English in their interaction, they observe and listen to interactions in English, which are their natural source of information of how English can be used in appropriate contexts.

Both responses from Heather, the native speaker of English and the bilingual teachers, were insightful on two accounts: the first because all teachers felt that interaction is a natural way to acquire English in an environment where English is a dominant language and secondly, because their concepts of interaction were viewed in a different vein. For Heather, English acquisition occurs in a 'natural' interaction which means the children mutually speak when they feel like doing so, whereas Ming feels in order for the ELLs to acquire English they need to find ways to interact with the native speakers. The teachers' view of the concept that 'English acquisition occurs naturally' demonstrated that there were some challenges even when the process of acquisition is claimed by the majority of the teachers as natural. For example, there were limited interactions between the ELLs and their English speaking friends.

The central significance of my findings is that through the exploration of New Zealand early childhood teachers' perspectives and practices, important insights have been offered that have the power to improve educational practices in early childhood settings for immigrant children in relation to English acquisition. While some of the teachers' perspectives and practices may have a facilitative effect on English acquisition, others may hinder it.

CONCLUSION

Due to a significant increase in the number of ELLs in New Zealand ECE centres, it is important for early childhood teachers to understand the emphasis upon sociocultural theories in the ECE curriculum, so that they can effectively apply these theories to their practices. While the teachers argued that English acquisition was natural in an English dominant environment, the complexities of English dominance environment were experienced by the teachers and the ELLs.

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