Early Home Literacy: Some Insights Into The Cultural And Linguistic Worlds Of A Malay Child*

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Abstract
This paper provides a brief insight into a case study of a young Malay girl learning literacy at home. The study is grounded in sociocultural and interactional ethnographic perspectives of learning and is part of a pilot project that sets out to understand how children in English-knowing bilingual Malay families in Singapore come to learn literacy within the milieu of their homes. Two themes that form part of the child’s cultural and linguistic worlds are discussed here: oral interaction around texts and beliefs about literacy. I concur with other studies that suggest that families are key sites where literacy and linguistic competence are constructed and that young children’s emergent literacy learnings may not always come in ways that are recognised in schools.

Introduction
Over the past two decades, the field of language and literacy studies has moved away from thinking about language and literacy in terms of skills and competence towards investigating the role of language and literacy as situated practices. Among the earlier work, Taylor (1983) studied young children learning about literacy in the home and reported on the dynamic relationships involved in the transmission and development of literacy practices in families. Heath (1983) highlighted the different social and cultural conceptions of literacy which children from different communities may bring with them to school. The role of specific beliefs and practices in families that promote literacy learning has been re-emphasized in more recent studies in emergent literacy (Evans et al., 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Robertson, 2002).

Ethnographic work is used to understand the range of meanings and functions which literacy can have in different contexts. Behind much of these work is the suggestion that models of literacy which operate in schools are rather specialised in comparison with its range of uses in people’s everyday lives, and that for some children the purposes and meanings which are attached to literacy in school may conflict with those they experience at home or in their community (Wells, 1985; Snow & Ninio, 1986; Goldenberg et al., 1992).

In multilingual situations where adults and children have access to a number of different literacies in different languages and scripts, the different literacy choices they make may be shaped by their social conditions, cultural experience and personal histories. The work of Saxena (1993) on a Punjabi Sikh family in Southall, England, and...
that of Volk and de Costa (2003) on three Puerto Rican families living in a Midwestern city in the U.S., to name a few, testify to the complex literacy lives of non-mainstream bilingual families.

Singapore, a meritocratic capitalist state, offers an interesting setting for the study of the functions and meanings of literacy practices in the context of life in an evolving multilingual society. The primacy of English in the state’s bilingual policy (the other language being one of the ‘mother tongues’ – Chinese, Tamil, Malay and others) on the basis of its utility for science, technology and commerce has important consequences for the dynamics of language use both at home, school and the workplace. The existence of three different ethnic groups speaking their respective ‘mother tongue’ languages and English may reveal important details that are significant in influencing the functions and meanings of literacy practices.

**The Present Study**

A six-month pilot study was carried out by this author to build on what little has been done to describe meaningful learning experiences in the homes of Malay families in Singapore. Grounded in sociocultural and interactional ethnographic perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978; Street, 1984), the study aimed to understand how different Malay families define and negotiate literacy by looking at how the children practise reading and writing as these occur in the home within the context of play, storybook reading, doing homework, or as part of the management of friendship and family relationships (cf. Li, 2002). Inherent in the approach is the idea that ‘literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts (Barton and Hamilton, 2000:9). As a set of social practices, literacy is shaped ‘by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others (Barton and Hamilton, 2000:12).

In this paper, ‘literacy events’ are defined as activities where literacy has a role (Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Any time a target child or anyone in the child’s immediate environment directly uses any type of literacy technology (such as a book, pencil, newspaper or the internet) or is in any other way engaged with written language including participating in verbal interactions where some kind of written text is referred to as the focus of attention or even just as topic of talk, the observer describes the event in detail. The focus is on providing a description of the actions that takes place, the contexts in which the event arises and is played out. ‘Literacy practices’ are the actions people do as a reflection of the ways in which they understand and value literacy (Volk & de Acosta, 2003). These concepts, literacy events and literacy practices, reinforce the perspective on literacies as socially constructed and situated practices.

Three bilingual Malay families were selected, each from a different socio-economic background as reflected in the educational qualification of the mothers (housewives with a secondary, pre-university, or university level education) and family dwelling (2-bedroom, 3-bedroom, 3-bedroom+1-study public housing flat). For reasons of space limitations in the present paper, I will describe only one of the families, namely, the family living in a 2-bedroom flat with the mother having the lowest educational qualification. Two themes pertaining to this family have been selected for discussion: verbal interaction and play, and discourse around literacy and social character. These are
some of the themes (others to be reported elsewhere) that are potentially useful in illuminating the cultural and linguistic worlds in which Malay children live in and how they draw from them in order to make sense of new experiences.

The Rashid Family
This is a family of four comprising the father Rashid and his wife Zaharah, their 5-year old daughter Sanah and 6-year old son Saiful. Rashid has a pre-university qualification and works in a Burger King outlet managing its operations. He has a jovial personality and speaks fluent Singapore English\(^2\) and Malay. Zaharah, a housewife, was educated in Malaysia up to the secondary level. She speaks mainly Malay but has picked up English since she got married and moved to Singapore. Apart from doing household chores, Zaharah takes charge of her children’s education helping them to read and do their homework. She is conscious of her limited English and sometimes wonders if that is enough to support her children’s literacy.

Both children attend the same kindergarten. Sanah, the target child, is not able to read on her own, so whenever she appears to be reading aloud, it is almost always from memory. But she enjoys being read to by others and doing things with books such as flipping the pages to look at the pictures. Saiful is comparatively quieter but he can read simple texts and words he is familiar with; for words he cannot recognise, he will either skip them or try to pronounce them. Saiful was reported by his parents to have already been reading at Sanah’s age. Both children speak Malay fluently and they both have a growing liking for English, even if only broken English, particularly in the case of Sanah. Most of the story books available at home are in English.

Theme 1: Oral Interaction and Play
In this family, father-child interaction is often playful. The father is talkative (as is Sanah) and often jokes with his wife and the children. On frequent occasions, he will tease the children by saying something contrary to the ongoing discourse but in a way that makes the contradiction seems quite obvious. One morning, Sanah was about to step out of the house with her mother to fetch her brother from one of two kindergarten centres he attends.\(^3\) It was almost raining outside.

Excerpt #1

1. F: Dengar bunyi tu? Bunyi *cat*. 
   Hear that? The sound of a cat.
2. SN: Itu *cat*, itu *bird*. 
   That’s not a cat, it’s a bird caught in the rain.

   In this excerpt, the father offered a statement to match a natural event. But the mismatch was picked up by Sanah almost immediately who in turn offered an alternative explanation. While in this situation the purpose of the father’s teasing is simply to have fun with her daughter, pedagogically, this is almost a test of the child’s ability to comprehend natural events that occur around her. That Sanah picked up the mismatch is indicative of her successful participation in oral interaction.
As indicated earlier, Sanah is ready and receptive to reading judging by the pleasure she derives from being read to by adults around her. Whenever she ‘reads’ those stories back to others, she often improvises the stories, weaving in her own imagination. On one of those occasions, Sanah (SN) recounted a story to me (R) as she spread a Malay language picture book in front of her. Both Saiful (AL) and the father (F) were present, the latter interrupting her narrative twice with remarks that are purposely out of line with her story (line 5 and 6). Sanah, aware of her father’s typically teasing manner, nevertheless protested with a “no” before continuing with her story.

Excerpt #2

1. R:  Ah! Apa tu?
2. SN:  Tikus dia ah ah hitam.
3. R:  Di mana tikus ni?
4. SN:  Dia kat sini, kat rumah ni. Nanti dia nangis.
5. F:  Eh, dia ketawa
6. SN:  Taklah…
8. SN:  Nanti nanti dia...Bila dia masuk aje, pintu dia tutup.
9. R:  Mmm.
10. SN:  Nanti dia suruh tolong.
11. R:  Siapa suruh tolong?
12. SN:  Dia ni suruh dia tolong.
13. R:  Mintak tolong.
14. AL:  Ni ni ni.
15. R:  Eh! Mintak tolong. Dia nak apa?
16. F:  Dia nak main.
17. SN:  No.. Ayah diam. … Pak Usu.
18. R:  Pak Usu? Pak Usu buat apa?
19. SN:  Buat... ah ni suruh kejar kucing pergi kejar tikus.

Ah! What’s that?
The mouse is black.
Where is the mouse?
He’s here, in this house. He is crying.
Eh, he is laughing.
No …
He is in this cage? Ah? Oh this is a trap, Sanah.
Later, later he…When he comes in, the door will close.
Mmm.
Later he will ask to help.
Who asked to help?
He asks him to help.
Asks for help.
This this this.
Eh! Asks for help. What does he want?
He wants to play.
No.. Father keep quiet. … Pak Usu.
Pak Usu? What is Pak Usu doing?
To…. ah ask him to chase after the mouse.

In this instance, Rashid was clearly amusing himself and the amusement seemed to be shared by Sanah and not at her expense; she played along by saying “no” and continued with her narrative. This was possible because ‘teasing’ occurs consistently in the father’s oral interaction with the other members of the family and that teasing initiations in the family have become ritualized and accompanied by playful contextualization cues. This makes it easy for the children to respond.
Teasing need not necessarily be used by adults primarily to play and to have fun with children. It can also be used to control children’s behaviour, as is evident in the following excerpt.

Excerpt #3

1. SN: Dr Mukhlis, mana [where is] Cik Noriha?
2. R: Cik Noriha, she cannot make it lah. She said er kirim salam [send her regards to] Siti. Because she’s working else where.
3. SN: Why?
5. SN: Why?
6. R: Why? Because she wants to do that.
7. SN: (...) she go to work now (...) 
8. F: Sanah, she owe you money eh.
9. SN: Huh? What?
10. F: Cik Noriha owe you money eh.
11. SN: Taaak! [Nooo!] (stomped to the father and pushed him) You ah, funny ah father.

In this context, I was with Saiful listening to him reading. Sanah was with my new research assistant engaging in some talk. She came over to me to ask about my previous research assistant, Noriha, whom she was fond of and who has left to work in a child care centre. Not getting a satisfactory answer from me, she repeated the question why Noriha was not with me. In the meantime, Sanah’s father was keeping a watchful eye on his children and decided at some point to interrupt her and stopped her from harassing me. And he did that by offering Sanah an overtly irrelevant question “she (Noriha) owe you money?” (line 8). Sanah at first could not understand the relevance of his question but seemed to have understood the hint on the second opportunity; in fact she was embarrassed by her father’s question that she stomped towards him and pushed him. After that she returned to my new assistant.

It is quite clear that Sanah is already adept at interpreting teasing as play. I have yet to see her participating in teasing sequences of her own with her brother or other children and adults (cf. Eisenberg, 1986). It is also apparent that Sanah, who would otherwise be regarded as not being able to ‘read’ in the conventional sense of the word, is confidently demonstrating her metacognitive awareness of contradiction, not to mention coherency of meaning, through oral interaction and play. While the father’s intention is to tease, the teasing resembles a tutorial practice (Olson, 1977) that tests the child’s understanding of the story, or, if the child is improvising, the coherency of the improvised story. The language interactions used in this low-income family is clearly playful but one which, in a ‘schooled’ sense, may not be viewed as facilitating learning to become literate.
Theme 2: Discourse around Literacy and Social Character

While Sanah is not averse to ‘reading’ and books, the parents thought that these are not what she is naturally good at or has a real inclination for. During reading aloud activities at home, she often has to rely on, and be assisted by, the mother. The father described her as follows:

Excerpt #4

Sanah is like, you would have to tell her to do it. Not inclined. That’s why, I’m beginning to worry… She’s not inclined to read. She’s more inclined to communicate; she’s more inclined to talk, to sing. Most of the time she sings; whatever song, Malay song… *Apa tu yang bulat bulat tu* [those circular things]… all these things she memorise. She sings most of the time.

In comparison, her brother Saiful is identified by the parents as the one who gravitates more naturally to books from the time he was three years old – “for him, it’s just natural”. Of the young Saiful, the father commented:

Excerpt #5

So whatever my books ….. he will just pick up, play, play, play with it, that kind of thing; newspapers, magazines. Whatever the mother is reading, he will take a look…And then start demanding me to buy books.

However, the many reading activities that Saiful (and Sanah) participates in at home are more often oral rendition activities, with the mother either listening and monitoring from a distance or reading aloud with him. It is thus not clear at this stage if his oral reading skills necessarily include comprehension of what he reads or is just a kind of decoding since there is little expression or discussion between mother and child. My own attempt to get him to talk about certain parts of a story book that he read to me has not been successful.

On the other hand, in as much as the parents acknowledge Sanah’s inclination to narrate and improvise stories – in fact, they are proud of her creativity and imagination – they do not view these qualities as part of the repertory of skills associated with successful meaning taking activity of reading either. Her ability to memorise, to narrate, and to talk are divorced from reading and seen more as skills that compensate for her lack of decoding prowess. The target for reading for the children in this family is thus less of a meaningful activity and more of a decoding exercise.

Interestingly, no similar praises along the lines of creativity and imagination were heaped on Saiful whom the parents satisfyingly regard as the more natural reader. While they have little worry about his literacy acquisition, they seem to link his lack of social skills to his comparatively ‘successful’ literacy. Of the difference between the siblings in terms of character, the father has this to say:
Excerpt #6

But on the other aspect, she compensates that (inability to read) with her ability to... narrate things, to imagine things, she’s more of an advocator, and she leads, you see that’s where he (Saiful) is lacking… This one (Sanah) is a fighter, you know, this one (Saiful) is a softie…

Excerpt #7

Initially, we were... we have this fear whereby she’s lagging behind... after a while I said no, she has her own ways, she has her own skills, character... like singing, play-acting… We go along, we play along because that I would say that’s her skills that’s her niche, rather than this one (Saiful). This one is slightly different. This one is by the book.

It appears that in the cultural world of Sanah and Saiful, literacy tends to be associated with being soft. In contrast to Sanah, Saiful was able to read when he was her age. Moreover, in contrast to Sanah who can be chatty and assertive with people whom she can relate to, Saiful is quieter and sometimes finds difficulty keeping up socially with his more aggressive friends and even her sister. During play-acting at home, Saiful usually takes on a dominated character. In classroom play, for instance, Saiful is the student while Sanah is the teacher. In a leadership scenario, Saiful plays a character who is led by the character assumed by Sanah.

Saiful’s natural affinity to books also earns him the label ‘bookish’ by his father who also thinks that the boy needs ‘toughening up’ for he was found to have been bullied by some children in one of the kindergarten he attends. The father once said that “whoever wants to kidnap him is easy”. ‘Being literate is being soft’ thus represents one type of family beliefs about literacy, which can have unwarranted implications for literacy development.

It is interesting to note that the kindergarten teacher who taught both children in separate classes corroborates partly the father’s impression of the two children. In class, Sanah is reported to be the quiet and reserved type but only because she is socially mindful of making the right moves without stepping on other peoples’ shoes. She is quietly firm and does not show much emotion even when she is pleased after being praised by her teacher. In contrast, Saiful is the more visible character: chatty, speaks well, very active in teacher-guided discussion. However, he can be rash in words and actions, and has difficulty socialising and making friends. The teacher has also alluded to Saiful being ‘soft’.

Concluding Remarks

Studying and documenting the lived cultural experiences of pupils at home is important as a means of obtaining a broader picture of pupils’ competencies and practices. In this paper, two themes were highlighted: oral interaction and play, and literacy and social character. In the family described, the playful teasing by the father nurtures Sanah’s sociocultural knowledge of ways of using and responding to language. She is able to recognise nonliteral meaning and display emotional strength in the face of insult in the
form of teasing by the father. Despite her inability to read and lack of grammatical sophistication, she has learned to appropriate meaning from read texts and pictures and communicate this to others. This is a feat she acquired after repeated practice in using and learning from language and pictorial forms through appropriate participation in literacy events at home.

Understanding home literacy practices is important as a reminder that school is just one domain in peoples’ lives and that school literacy practices may need to be set within this wider context (Dyson, 1999; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). I cannot predict in what ways Sanah’s literacy will develop as she traverses the school system. But an understanding of the literacies that children like Sanah acquire at home offers opportunities for teachers to build on what children know and to explore the potential value of appropriating practices and knowledge from other contexts in children’s lives as resources for school learning. Policy-making can also be properly informed if there are grounded descriptions of what occurs in the homes and in the community.

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Note
1. Malay is the largest minority race in Singapore (14%) with Chinese being the majority race (75%) in a population of over 4 million.
2. The English being spoken in many households is typically that of Singapore English, a local variety that has borrowed elements, both vocabulary and grammar, from the other local languages, namely Chinese dialects and Malay.
3. Apart from the kindergarten which both children attend, a kindergarten that draws children of all races, there is another type of kindergarten, a mosque-run kindergarten that attracts only Malay-Muslim children, which Saiful goes to. The parents send him there primarily to expose him to more Malay.

References
Evans et al., 2000;  