

Speaking Through English, Mandarin and Malay: Signs of Developmental Grammar in a Malaysian Trilingual

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Abstract

As a multicultural and multiethnic society, Malaysians as a whole, not only practise various religions and celebrate various cultural functions, they also have a range of common languages in their linguistic repertoire. Many of them including young Malaysians have a repertoire of languages to help them through their communicative tasks. This study provides authentic data extracted from the natural environment of a three-year old who is on the verge of acquiring and using three languages simultaneously. Data acquired from the trilingual child depict utterances spoken in the three languages of English, Mandarin and Malay. Analysis of these utterances indicates that there are some variations in his linguistic structures. Although it can be seen that Mandarin tends to be his dominant language, with English as an additional language and Malay a language he is just beginning to acquire, the findings suggest that the speaker may not always have the most appropriate choice of word in the dominant language. As a result of that gap, the trilingual child resorts to code switching to deliver his message. Where English was used in his utterances, analysis shows that these contained more ungrammatical structures when compared to his Mandarin utterances. It is proposed that this was due to the language transfer impacted by Mandarin and also due to the consequence of being exposed to the spoken variety of English in his environment.

Key terms: linguistic structures, deviant/developmental, dominant language, influence/interference, strategies

Introduction

With globalization, monolingualism is gradually being replaced by bilingualism or multilingualism as a result of the activities of intermigration, trade and commerce, as well as education and political factors. As Ellis (1997, p. 3) writes, "...people have had to learn a second language, not just as a pleasing pastime, but,...as a means of obtaining an education or securing employment." In a multilingual society, there is no denying that the presence of the myriad ethnic communities and their varieties of languages and cultures has an impact on the current or host society in which they reside. Today's linguistic situation has changed to one that requires many if not all individual speakers to become more familiar with a diversity of languages. As each ethnic community blends and merges into one enormous society through the process of communication, it is inevitable that such a society will need to expand linguistically so that its people can communicate among themselves, at least to some extent.

Malaysia is no exception in comparison, particularly in today's context, where linguistic demands have intensified by the recent influx of foreign workers into the local scene, particularly in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, both of which are situated in the Klang Valley, one of the busiest parts of the country. Malaysians and foreigners alike, who want to be a part of the "melting pot", need to enlarge their linguistic repertoire with an L2 (second language), L3 (third language), L4 (additional language) or even more. While it is not mandatory for a speaker to be "equally" competent in all those languages, it is vital that the speaker who strives for

multilingualism has some knowledge of grammatical forms and structures of those languages which have been acquired. Besides knowing some grammatical rules and structures, a speaker should also be sociolinguistically aware of when, where, why and with whom certain forms of those languages may be used. Asmah Haji Omar (1992, 1993) suggests that this is vital for speakers who want to be part of the Malaysian community.

There are many advantages when one has two or more languages at one's command. One of these advantages is that it can help to open doors for social interaction, provide opportunities and avenues for personal growth and expansion, and the exposure to various cultures and knowledge. In the Malaysian context, multilingualism is not only apparent at the society level but also in individual homes. In some Malaysian homes, a person's linguistic prowess may range from being proficient in two languages to being proficient in one but just communicative in another five languages. Asmah Haji Omar (1992) and David (1996) have shown and discussed how multilingual Malaysians do not necessarily have equal competence in all the languages which an average Malaysian may have in his or her linguistic repertoire. The Malaysian environment is such that many school-going children cannot avoid the typical multilingual setting (see Kow, 2003, Kuang, David, and Zuraidah, 2006). Besides being exposed to the two languages of Malay and English at school, ethnic children also learn additional languages like Mandarin and Tamil (in vernacular schools). In addition, some of these school-going children may also be using dialects at home. Thus, it is not surprising that the linguistic developments of these children do not always develop at the same rate. In other words, when they speak such languages or dialects, the language structure of one specific language may be more advanced than the language structure of another. One reason for this could be attributed to the former being more dominant in use (see David, 1996, 2001 for examples of Sindhi children). The different rate of their linguistic development implies that there will be some grammatical variations in the language structures of those languages which the children speak. Consequently, in multilingual children some aspects of their L1 may contain well-formed structures while some aspects of their L2 and L3 may indicate signs of deviation.

Aim

Based on authentic data which have been extracted from the spoken discourse of one Malaysian trilingual, this study hopes to shed light on the linguistic development of the three languages which a three-year old child is acquiring. The development will focus on the linguistic structures which, in this context, refer to the construction of words and utterances articulated by the child to express meanings. Data will show the extent of his grammatical development in the three languages of Mandarin, English and Malay. This study will also highlight the child's ability to apply certain communicative strategies in making himself understood such as substituting an easy word for a difficult one and using code switching to make an emphasis.

All children are different and they tend to learn at a different pace because of their cultural and ecological differences. In addition, each family has a different way of interacting with their children, thus every child develops at a slightly different rate. The importance of individual differences has been much emphasized (Brewer, 2001). Child educators are also aware that the child's learning environment, economic status, the background of his caretakers and the amount and variety of language input given to him determines the kind of linguistic knowledge the child will acquire and produce eventually. By bearing this perspective in mind, it can be understood that the findings of one case study do not suggest that all three-year olds possess similar cognitive qualities and would produce similar grammatical structures. The interpretations of the data extracted from this study merely provide some evidence to indicate that a young language learner goes through the acquisition process by manifesting some features of ungrammatical structures in the languages which he speaks.

Background of the study and its participants

Data was acquired through the observations of one three-year old Malaysian Chinese male subject (LH). The observations focused on the family of the subject in a home setting. Conversations extracted for the purpose of this study are naturally occurring ones. The participants who interacted with the subject are the family members: the parents and two elder brothers, both of whom are also multilingual because of their upbringing and educational backgrounds. All the participants have spoken competence in English, Mandarin, Malay, Cantonese (main dialect spoken in the neighbourhood) and Hokkien (maternal dialect) although their fluency may range. The three brothers communicate among themselves only in Mandarin. During the day, the subject goes to a day-care centre which is managed by a Mandarin/Cantonese/Hokkien speaking child minder who is assisted by an Indonesian helper who uses Indonesian Malay with the children. The child’s environment may be described as multilingual and this is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

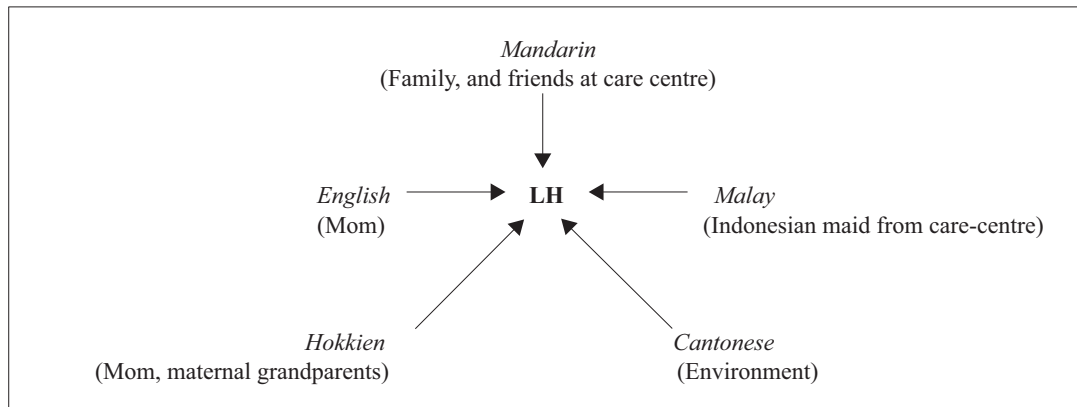


Figure 1. LH’s contact with other languages

Literature Review

This study does not focus on second language acquisition per se. However, the fact that this study focusses on the outcome of one learner’s utterances made in three languages which are then analysed in terms of their linguistic structures may be able to illustrate the child’s grammatical competence in the three languages. Hence, this study could be seen as bearing some connections to the field of second language acquisition and second language learning.

Of the many factors that facilitate and enhance how and what a learner learns, external factors play an important role in the learning. Social psychologists believe in the input of the environment and have also mentioned that reinforcements may increase learning ability. As mentioned earlier, the environment of the child’s upbringing and the conditions imposed on the child may also determine the kind of language output provided by the child. The child who is taught to use a more difficult vocabulary will learn to use it ultimately while the child who is given the correct pronunciation will also reproduce pronunciations that are socially acceptable. Holzman (1997, p. 118) emphasised that “children acquire language as it is used with them” hence it could be deduced that the language environment builds up the child’s linguistic repertoire. Inevitably, this also implies that the variety of spoken language provided by the adults will determine the variety of language produced by the child although in some instances, peer imitation may also influence how the child speaks. In

addition, the attitude of some children may also influence how they learn languages i.e., a child may enjoy learning and speaking the language or may be distracted by the negative associations of the language due to some psychological factors. Needless to say, for a child to acquire more language competency, an increased vocabulary will be necessary. Moreover, child psychologists have proposed that when children are forced to know the meanings of new words and made to use them, they are more likely to acquire new words (Kail, 1997).

Besides those facilitative factors such as the child’s social environment, his upbringing and the language input provided by the adults concerned, the cognitive mechanism (Holzman, 1997) of the individual child also contributes to certain levels of acquisition. Perhaps it is fair to say that the child’s cognitive development and linguistic abilities are determined internally. Thus, the respective child’s linguistic development may reach a certain level not just because of the various factors mentioned above but also due to internal mechanisms.

No two children acquire exactly the same language competence. Krashen (1981, pp. 119-120) compared the language input of two cases of second language learning and second language acquisition. One was that of five-year old Paul and the other was that of thirteen-year old Ricardo. The former had successfully acquired English as an L2 whereas the latter had not. In his examination of the language employed between Paul and the adult who provided the input, Krashen agreed with Wagner-Gough and Hatch (1975) who suggested that when the language input is simple and based on the here and now, the child is more likely to acquire the language. On the other hand, when the language input is based on a complicated issue and is sequenced in complex structures, it puts the second language learner at a disadvantage. Table 1 below illustrates this point. It is clear that the language input provided for Paul’s learning was simple, thereby making it easy for him to retain it in memory. However, it is also obvious that the same data appears to be more restricted and constrained in terms of language structures (Wagner-Gough & Hatch, 1975). On the other hand, Ricardo was probably less successful with language learning because of the complex structures provided by his learning environment.

Table 1. *The language input provided to Paul*

Adult	Paul
Paul, are you writing?	Yeah.
What are you doing?	I’m write.
Paul, are you writing?	Yeah.
What are you doing?	I’m writing.
Is the baby crying?	Baby is crying

(Source: Krashen 1981, p. 119)

The process of language acquisition and language learning

Bartram & Walton (1991) note that in language acquisition and language learning, babies in particular possess an “internal syllabus” in which they form their own hypothesis about language learning. Although language input is provided to them, they do not absorb these wholesale. Instead they go through a process of “hypothesis-forming”. Figure 2 below demonstrates the various stages which Bartram and Walton suggest that all normal babies and L2 learners experience in the process of language acquisition and language learning.

First, the baby is exposed to a lot of language.
After this, the baby subconsciously forms ideas or hypotheses about how language works.
The baby then puts these ideas into practice by trying out the language.
In the midst of it all, the baby further receives new information through more exposure of the language.
The baby then changes the original idea of his hypothesis so as to fit into the new information.
Finally, the baby tries out the new ideas.
The same cycle repeats again and again.

(Source: Bartram and Walton, 1991, p. 12)

Figure 2. *Process of language learning and language acquisition*

In the process of learning language, all language learners make mistakes whether in their spoken or written text. Mistakes refer to the deviant forms of a language structure which, when compared to the standard variety, is ungrammatical and socially unacceptable. Mistakes are a natural process of language learning and they are part of the learning process. Not only are mistakes a “natural part of the learning process, they are also an inescapable fact of language learning” (Bartram & Walton, 1991, p.5). For after all, in any communicative situation, it is “comprehensibility” that one targets for instead of “perfection” (Bartram & Walton, 1991, p. 5). Making mistakes is inevitable since even native speakers of a language make them hence, when mistakes do occur during the process of language acquisition or learning, they should not be perceived negatively. The occurrence of mistakes should not be a big issue as long as language learners communicate their meanings successfully. In the context of this study, such mistakes are described as deviant forms although they are also perceived as part of the child’s developmental evidence.

Framework for analysis

The analysis of data in this study will be descriptive in nature. Data is composed of a collection of utterances extracted from a total of fifteen hours of conversation over a period of three weeks, sometimes on a daily basis, sometimes at two- to three-day intervals, depending on the suitability of the environment. All data were entered into a journal with context and time indicated. However, only certain utterances were used for analysis in this study.

In the context of this study, data extracted from the spoken discourses of a three-year old trilingual child was examined for their linguistic structures which are bound to consist of deviant structures which are non-existent in standard language forms. As mentioned above, the study of deviant structures is one aspect of studying “learner language” and it is this kind of evidence, according to Ellis (1997) that enables researchers to identify “what exactly a learner has learnt and what he is trying to learn” (Ellis, 1997, p. 3).

In second language acquisition studies, learner language is extracted for the purpose of examination and interpretation. Data of this kind may be analysed in a number of ways. Of the many ways available, data could be analysed in terms of the learner’s overall ability as a way of gauging the learner’s fluency in the use of his L2. Another way to determine the language learner’s L2 language competency is by studying pronunciations in order to understand to what level the learner’s accents have evolved over time. Additionally, data may also be analysed through the learner’s use of words so as to detect how the learner has improved and developed lexical ability. In trying to establish the learner’s learning capability in the study of second language acquisition, many have chosen to focus on the grammar component of the discourse, with the intention to identify deviant structures which, it has been suggested, can shed light on how learners learn. In relation to this, Ellis (1997, p.

3) mentions that researchers tend to select a “grammatical structure such as plurals or relative clauses” as the frame of reference in measuring the language learner’s grammatical structures. The learner’s ability to produce correct or incorrect grammatical structures is then explored through this frame of reference. The result acquired from this would show how much a learner’s grammatical structures had developed or had stagnated over time.

In the context of this study, it is evident that the utterances of the three-year old subject contained deviant forms which were described earlier as those parts of the utterances which have not been “correctly arranged” or “correctly sequenced” according to the standard variety of a language. In the Malaysian context, “correctly arranged” structures are seen as those utterances which are grammatically correct as used within context.

While the data of this study may comprise a mixture of three languages, English, Mandarin and Malay, there appeared to be more utterances articulated through English and Mandarin with a small amount in Malay. The minimal Malay utterances could be due to the fact that the subject was just on the verge of learning to use the language. The linguistic structures of these three languages will be examined from a grammatical perspective. It is hypothesized that the Mandarin utterances will contain less ungrammatical (deviant) forms because it is the dominant language of the child. In other words, the dominant language should be grammatically better formed since the child speaker had more exposure to the language forms, compared to English. Malay, being the most recent language to be acquired is probably less used in the child’s environment. The linguistic structures of all three languages will be examined and where the ungrammatical (deviant) forms exist, they will be explained. Where there is an indication of the subject experiencing some cognitive processes, these will also be discussed.

Format of transcriptions

In the boxed samples, the participants are outlined as:

Subject: [LH]
Subject’s mother: [M]
Subject’s father: [P]
Subject’s eldest brother: [SH]
Subject’s second brother: [PH]

The languages are indicated as:

English: [no indication]
Mandarin: [Md.]
Malay: [Ml. bold]

Translations are provided in parentheses, (), and missing grammatical structures are indicated through the square brackets, [].

Studies have indicated that it is rare to find a bilingual who has equal competence in the two languages which he speaks. Of the languages a bilingual speaker is capable of using, it is often the case that one language predominates in the linguistic repertoire with one language being more actively used than the other. However, this may be dependent on topics, settings and interlocutors. In the case of one language predominating, it has also been mentioned that a dominant language is one which a speaker uses more often in the environment due to various reasons. In that respect, the speaker’s dominant language should contain adequate vocabulary and spoken structures that are well-formed.

Analysis of Spoken English

The samples provided below show that the child’s linguistics structures are of varied developmental stages, some well-formed and grammatical while others less so. The analysis begins by looking at the subject’s (LH’s) spoken English. To some extent, it is apparent that the child’s spoken English contain structures that have been influenced by his dominant language, Mandarin.

1. Subject-verb inadequacy

L2 learners, as the label (L2) clearly indicates, often have another language, often termed as L1, at their disposal. Research has also shown that where the learning of one language (L2) comes after a particular language (L1) has been acquired by the speaker, the end result shows that there will always be some kind of language interference - from the L1 on the L2. Sample 1 suggests that the three-year old trilingual has not quite accomplished the use of an appropriate subject-verb agreement in spoken English and this is attributed to the L1 influence of Mandarin.

Sample 1. *LH is showing mom his skills at hanging from an edge without falling down*

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	LH	I can play like this.
T2		Cannot fall down one . [When I play like this, I won’t fall down.]
T3	M	You can what?
T4	LH	Can like this, cannot fall done one . [I can hang this way and I won’t fall down.]
T5	M	Come baby, show mommy what you can do.
T6	LH	Like this, can fall down. [If I hang this way, I will fall down.]

In Sample 1 above, LH spoke in four turns. While T1 is deemed as grammatical, the spoken structures that appear in T2, T4 and T5 provide evidence of ungrammatical structures. Appropriate grammatical structures are indicated in the square bracket []. Although ungrammatical, the message is comprehensible and communicatively clear. LH’s inability to use the more appropriate grammatical structures such as those indicated in [] suggest that he was unable to use the structure of ‘subject - verb’ agreement. Evidence is traced to LH’s utterances in T1, T2, T4 and T6. The utterances indicate that LH was not able to use a subject like ‘I’, an appropriate verb like ‘hang’ and the modal verb ‘will’ to illustrate the possible consequences of his actions. The ungrammatical spoken structures suggest that the trilingual child’s spoken English is communicatively acceptable because the message was conveyed. However, the spoken structures appear to have been influenced by the structures of Mandarin such as in the use of the possession, (‘one’) where ‘my one’ is articulated as ‘*wor terk*’ in Mandarin. Thus, when LH wanted to say ‘can not fall down’ his utterance was influenced by the Mandarin structure of ‘*pu hwei tieh tao terk*’ which when translated becomes, ‘cannot fall down one’. The child’s reliance on the use of the word, ‘one’ also surfaces in Samples 2 and 3 below. From Sample 1, data indicating ungrammatical structures which have been influenced by Mandarin is further traced to T4 which says, ‘can like this’. This structure has been transferred from a Mandarin construction, ‘*ker yee cher yiang*’. In T6, ‘like this, can fall down’ is another utterance that has been influenced by the spoken structure of Mandarin

which can be exemplified by, '*cher yiang, ker yee tieh tao*' which means 'like this, can fall down' in literal English.

Sample 2. *In the bedroom, LH is biting two apples at once and is being questioned by his mother*

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	M	Why are you biting two apples?
T2	LH	Cannot ah? (Typical Malaysian way of asking?)
T3	LH	Mom, you want [to] eat?
T4	M	No.
T5	M	Which one is nice?
T6	LH	Pink one [is nice]. [the] Green one [is] not nice.

From the utterances shown in Sample 2, it can be seen that LH's spoken English was not grammatical and it is highly probable that it was due to the influence of Mandarin. Evidence is traced to the structure of his question in T2 'cannot ah' which has been translated from Mandarin such as '*pu ker yee ah?*' instead of the more grammatical form in English, 'why not'. More evidence of LH's utterances containing Mandarin influence is traced to T6 in Sample 2 where LH applied the use of 'one' again and this is in the structure of 'Pink one. Green one not nice.' The use of 'one' as an influence from Mandarin has been explained in the above analysis of Sample 1. To locate more evidence which shows that LH's spoken English has been influenced by his spoken Mandarin, we look at T6 again 'Pink one. Green one, not nice'. This particularly short and ungrammatical structure suggests that LH's short statement was due to the fact that he could not make a complete utterance like 'The pink one is nice but the green one is not nice' as the structure is exceptionally long. In addition, one does not expect a three year old to be able to articulate such a long sentence. It is also possible that LH had not acquired the ability to use the verb, 'is' thus he had to reduce his utterance by omitting the verb 'is'. At this point of development, LH is only three years old, hence, it is not a vital grammatical component because the objective of the young child was to convey his message. Similar instances of omitting the 'is' verb also emerge in the subsequent samples of data.

Sample 3. *LH has removed and opened M's (mom) purse and M notices*

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	M	Lihoong!
T2		What are YOU doing there, hah?
T3	LH	Take my money.
T4	M	Why are you taking out all my money?
T5	LH	My one . This is my one .
T6	M	Put back my money please!
T7	LH	My money

2. Declaratives

Sample 3 portrays an exchange of words between the child and an adult where the former asserted his claims. In this instance, we see LH showing the ability to make declaratives as shown in T3 'Take my money' and then

declaring again in T5 ‘my one, this is my one’ and again in T7 ‘my money’.

3. Egocentricity and the present continuous tense

Grammatical structures shown in the turns spoken by LH in Sample 3 demonstrate that the three-year old trilingual was unable to distinguish between what belongs to him and is his and what does not belong to him and so is not his. In other words, the notion of who owns the ‘possession’ is not an issue here as the subject clearly considered what he saw as belonging to him and this has been illustrated through the use of the adjectival pronoun ‘my’. It is possible that LH may not know the difference between ‘mine and yours’. It is also possible that he has not acquired the appropriate use of the second person adjectival pronoun ‘your’ at this phase of speaking. This phenomenon of asserting something as ‘my’ suggests that the child was still experiencing the egocentric stage of development proposed by Piaget (1969) and Vygotsky (1980). The egocentric spirit shown here focuses on the self and in this sample, we see LH asserting that the ‘money’ is his as is evidenced by the utterances indicated as T3, T5 and T7 in Sample 3 above.

In addition, by looking at the grammatical structures articulated by LH, it is also apparent that the three-year old trilingual was not competent enough to use the ‘present continuous tense’ in his spoken structure such as ‘I am taking my money’ instead of the less grammatical structure, ‘take my money’ as shown in T3. This particular deviant utterance provides evidence which shows that a growing child tends to convey his message in an abbreviated manner and the focus is on the verb, and in this example, the verb, ‘take’ was mentioned in relation to the object of contention ‘money’.

Further compounded by the egocentric spirit, it was inevitable that LH could only perceive the money as his, resulting in the use of ‘my’. Further evidence which shows that LH was not able to use the present continuous tense also emerged in subsequent utterances provided in Sample 4 below. One example can be traced to T2 where instead of saying ‘she is kissing the baby’ LH said, ‘he kiss the baby’.

Sample 4. Mom is checking on LH’s interpretation of the events on TV

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	M	What is the mommy doing?
T2	LH	He kiss the baby. [She is kissing the baby.]
T3		Because he [she] love[s] him

4. Cognitive Development and the [he] for [she] pronoun

Besides demonstrating that LH was still beyond the ability to use present continuous tense to illustrate an on-going process, data in Sample 4 also show that LH had acquired a full understanding of a TV advertisement which portrayed the display of affection. This cognitive development of the child may be interpreted as an advancement of the child concerned despite his age. It is possible that LH’s emotional development has also advanced as he not only understood the manifestation of love and affection shown through a physical gestures, he was linguistically equipped with the word, ‘kiss’ to suggest the emotions. The only defect we see here is a slight linguistic deficiency manifested by the incorrect use of pronouns. Instead of using the correct pronoun ‘she’ to indicate the mother in the advertisement, LH had used the incorrect pronoun ‘he’. This incorrectness suggests that the child was probably unable to distinguish between ‘he’ and ‘she’ at this age. It is also possible

that he was confused as children his age could be. Another possible reason is that he was affected by the Mandarin structure because Mandarin does not have any distinctions between a male or a female pronoun.

5. Using a conjunction like [‘because’]

Besides showing the ability to use the article ‘the’ appropriately as is shown in T2 in Sample 4, LH’s utterances in the same sample also demonstrate the child’s ability to use a conjunction such as ‘because’. This is commendable because it was applied appropriately and correctly in context. Although the instance of using the conjunction ‘because’ is clearly one small statistic, the evidence does suggest that the language input provided by the child’s linguistic surrounding has been helpful in developing his vocabulary and grammar. One can only assume that the more appropriate structures of English the child gets to hear, the more grammatical structures and vocabulary he would absorb and retain in his memory and linguistic repertoire. At appropriate times, these would then emerge in his verbal interactions.

Sample 5. Mom is checking on LH’s understanding of the TV programmes

T1	M	Lihoong, what are they doing?
T2		Look...look...look.
T3	LH	He beat [is hurting] him [her].
T4		He beat him. [He is hurting her.]
T5		He <i>sayang</i> (Malay word for love) he (her), ...he (she) cry (cries).

6. Substituting a difficult word with a simple word

From Sample 5 above, it can be seen that the statement ‘he beat him’ in T3 and T4 are ungrammatical because LH was unable to use the most appropriate verb, ‘hurt’ for the statement. It is possible that ‘hurt’ is a word which LH would hardly hear in his environment and as a result, he did not have the vocabulary in his repertoire. In addition, the sample shows that LH chose an easier word like ‘beat’ which is also an action that causes pain to express what he meant. From this sample of data, it can then be deduced that where a difficult word was required but did not exist in the linguistic repertoire of the child, the speaker would revert to using a simpler word which carries a similar meaning so that he could express what he mean. The strategy also indicates that the child was able to substitute a difficult lexical item which he probably did not possess with one that he had in his linguistic repertoire. Hence, it could be said that Sample 5 provided the evidence which shows the resourcefulness of a three year old speaker. The child used a simpler word to substitute a more difficult word. This also means that a young child has his own means of conveying his message.

The same phenomenon of using a simple word for a more difficult one is also reflected in utterance T5 of Sample 5 where LH reverted to using the Malay term, ‘*sayang*’ which is commonly used by Malaysians to suggest ‘love’. This probably occurred because LH was aware that when people ‘*sayang*’ each other, they follow a certain manner of behaviour which has been demonstrated by the characters on TV. In addition, it is likely that when LH’s family projects ‘love’, the family members also use the term, ‘*sayang*’ even though it is a Malay term. It is probably so commonly used in his environment that without a doubt, LH was able to apply the term fittingly into context.

7. Subject-verb agreement

Based on the data shown in Sample 5, it can also be seen that the utterances shown in T3 and T4 indicate that LH's utterances were not grammatical because he had omitted using the present singular tense form of ('s) after the verb 'beat' in T3 and T4. This is probably because LH is only three years old and that such a detailed measure of grammar was still beyond acquisition as even adult learners sometimes have problems with this. In addition, data in Sample 5 also indicate that LH was unable to apply the 'subject-verb agreement' structure as has been mentioned in Sample 1 above. It is possible that this is a difficult aspect of grammar to acquire for L2 learners. From Sample 5, it is also obvious that by T5, LH had articulated 'he *sayang* he, he cry...' which only serves to show that the child is able to narrate a short story.

Similar instances of the subject-verb agreement inadequacy mentioned above also emerge in T1 and T3 in Sample 6 below. For instance, in T1 and T2 (see below), the appropriate tenses as shown in the square bracket, [], for the third person have not been applied. The phenomenon may have occurred as a result of habit as it is hypothesized that this was probably how the rhyme was sung. Gillen (2003, p. 37) mentions that children just could not refrain from "repeating simple verse or lyrics in language that is different in style..." Further, as rhymes are verses which are more frequently sung by children repeatedly over time, the changes made to the words may have evolved, thus the children learning these rhymes could not help from singing them the way they are commonly sung. By nature, it is also a well-known fact that children like to imitate their peers thus, LH sung the rhyme the same way he had heard them. Hence, from this sample of data, it could be said that the ungrammatical structures seen in the rhymes sung by LH were due to habit. It is hypothesized that these developmental structures will gradually phase out and be replaced with more standard features when LH has acquired more grammatical competence from his surrounding.

Sample 6. LH is singing a local rhyme

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	LH	A-E-I-O-U, Bangali love[s] you
T2		Kiss your diamond[s] two by two
T3		Gorilla love[s] you.
T4	M	GOLLILA ah?
T5	LH	G-O-R-I-L-A
T6	M	Hmm, that's right.
T7		What is diamond?
T8	LH	Diamond[s] in the sky <i>lah</i> .

8. Discourse marker – erm

In spoken discourse a speaker who uses fillers which are also termed as markers such as sounds like *umm*, *ugh* or *erm*, are seen as competent speakers who use this as a strategy to think before they continue to speak (Holmes, 1992). Data illustrated in Sample 7 below indicate that even a three-year old has this competence.

Sample 7. LH is pestering his father to draw

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	P	What animal [do] you want me to draw?
T2	LH	Erm... horse!
T3	P	<i>Aiyo!</i> Difficult <i>lah</i> . [Oh dear, too difficult.]
T4	LH	No, you see, you see (showing P a book which has picture of horse.) (P then draws.)
T5	LH	<i>Ah..</i> like this,,like this (LH is drawing to show P how to draw.)
T6		K-R-O-U horse

Analysis of the utterances in Sample 7 suggests that LH is a competent speaker who has the knowledge of using strategies to make discourse (conversations) with other people. Data in this sample indicate that LH employed the discourse marker ‘erm’ as a pausing moment which allowed him to think before he spoke again. Evidence of this use of discourse marker is traced to T2 where ‘erm’ was articulated as a filler to fill in a conversation vacuum which was possibly due to a lack of idea and by the time he recovered, LH was able to propose a new suggestion to P (LH’s father) to draw ‘a horse’ as is indicated in T2.

When LH’s father declined to do so in T3, it was clear that LH was not ready to give up. In fact, LH salvaged the situation by first saying ‘no’ in T4 as a way to respond to the father’s refusal. ‘No’ was articulated as a strategy to ease his father’s insecurity about drawing a ‘horse’ and this, it is hypothesized, is only possible when the speaker involved is competent. Thus, LH’s refusal of ‘no’ in T3 illustrates the strategy of a competent speaker. Further, data in Sample 7 also indicate that LH attempted to alleviate his father’s insecurity by speaking further, using the phrase ‘you see, you see’ in T4 as a distraction for his father to ‘look’ and this was perceived as a gesture which LH used to point to the pictures of horses which were illustrated in a book. One purpose was to draw the father’s attention away and the other purpose of this utterance was to direct his father to draw by using the models of the horses illustrated. In this context, it can be said that LH spoke like a competent speaker who not only had the skill to pause and think via the filler ‘erm’ but also as a speaker who refused to take ‘no’ for an answer. Simultaneously, LH was capable of alleviating the fears or insecurities experienced by an older speaker.

Finally, from the data in Sample 7, it is also deduced that the three-year old speaker was able to pay compliments to others as a form of reward and this is evidenced in T5 where LH uttered ‘ah’, which mean yes, (see Kuang, 2002) as well as directing others as shown in the utterance ‘like this, like this’. Based on the context of the data shown in Sample 7 above, it can be said that a three-year old can emerge as a competent participant in a conversation.

The utterances provided in Sample 7 also indicate that LH’s spoken English is fluent as there was no sign of LH struggling with his words which are sometimes seen as hesitations or repetitions. Further, LH’s fluency in English is also evidenced by an attempt to ‘spell’ the word ‘horse’ even though wrongly, in T6.

In the Malaysian context, it is not surprising to expect a Malaysian child to speak English that is of the local variety. In this context, the local variety is referred to as the Malaysian English variety. Pillai (2006) has explained that the Malaysian variety is of the mesolectal kind where it is often spoken with reference to local cultures, intonations and accents while another local researcher, Baskaran (1987), also talks about the superficial

features of spoken Malaysian English in her PhD thesis. Sample 8 provides instances of this spoken variety.

Sample 8. LH is having a conversation with his mother

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	LH	Mom, what animal [do] you want [papa to draw]?
T2	M	Butterfly.
		LH then instructs P (his father) to draw a butterfly.
T3	LH	Wow! Very nice, you[r] butterfly, pa.

9. Omitting the verb to be [do]

In Sample 8 above, LH’s spoken English is likened to spoken Malaysian English which is exemplified by an absence of the verb to be ‘do’ in context. Besides the explanations provided by Pillai (2006), observations have also indicated that many Malaysian speakers of English tend to drop the verb to be ‘do’ in their spoken English such as in the question form of ‘What do you want?’, Malaysians tend to ask it as ‘What you want?’. Another example is the question form of ‘Where do you want to go?’ which many Malaysian speakers would articulate as ‘Where you want to go?’. In the above sample, LH’s utterance in T1 clearly shows that he too dropped the verb to be ‘do’ so that the correct question form of ‘Mom, what animal do you want?’ was uttered as ‘Mom, what animal you want?’.

10. Sociolinguistic competence

A speaker’s sociolinguistic competence enables acceptance by a particular society more easily. The acquisition of sociolinguistic competence suggests that the speaker knows the appropriate form to use, for what purpose, in what situation and on which group of people. By looking at the utterances shown in Sample 8, it can be seen that LH was capable of making interrogatives in English and this was when he asked his mother in T1 ‘Mom, what animal (do) you want?’ The three-year old child’s sociolinguistic competence was also evident in T3 which showed that he was able to make compliments through the use of ‘wow’. This acquisition of sociolinguistic competence suggests that the child has been equipped as a result of the language input he had received from his environment. It also provided him with the correct choice of words to convey and to be able to linguistically share good feelings with others as exemplified by the use of ‘wow’ and the phrase of ‘very nice’. The phrase ‘very nice’ indicates that the child was able to use a phrase that has been modified by an adverb, ‘very’ which means ‘a lot’.

11. Well-formed spoken English

Although some aspects of LH’s utterances shown earlier contain ungrammatical (developmental) structures, other aspects of his utterances which will be shown below suggest that LH’s spoken words could be described as well-formed and grammatical. The following samples illustrate this point.

Sample 9. LH is persisting that his mother gives him her book

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	LH	I want to write.

T2	M	No, no, this is for me to write what you say.
T3	LH	I want to draw.
T4	LH	You don't give me.
T5	LH	Mi, I want to draw.

Utterances from Sample 9 demonstrate that some aspects of the subject's utterances could be seen as well-formed or grammatical. For instance, in T1 'I want to write' is grammatically correct and appropriate. In addition, the utterances in T3 'I want to draw' and the utterances in T5 'Mi, I want to draw' are both very appropriate and correct in grammar. Based on these two utterances, it can be said that LH's spoken English is grammatical and thus well-formed. However, an utterance in T4 'You don't give me' is a 'give away' of LH's developmental stage because even though on surface it appears complete and grammatical, a deeper look at it suggests that it is not complete. It is possible that LH's utterance was meant to be articulated as 'You don't want to give me your book'. It is very unlikely that three-year old LH is able to repeat this structure since it is a complex structure that is composed of two different clauses. Despite the ungrammatical structure, LH was still able to convey his meaning successfully.

Sample 10. LH is insisting that he too wants to go to a particular shopping mall

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	M	I want to go to Subang Parade lah.
T2		I want to get a few things.
T3	LH	I want, I want, I want [to] go.

In Sample 10, utterance in T3 shows that LH could not apply the 'to' infinitive at this stage before the auxiliary verb 'go'. This is probably due to the complex nature of putting 'to' as an indicator before a second verb (which would happen later than the first verb). As observations have indicated, the use of the 'to' infinitive has been a constant problem among speakers of other languages like Mandarin and Japanese because it is an aspect of grammar that does not exist in their respective languages. In that sense, it could be assumed that the use of 'to' is a problematic area for most Asian speakers. In this sample, the utterance in T3 shows that LH was unable to apply the 'to' infinitive correctly although earlier in Sample 8, LH's utterance indicated that he could use 'to' correctly as shown in 'I want to draw.' This slight inconsistency is probably temporary and the reason could be attributed by the influence of the other people in his socio-linguistic environment, for instance, his peers. As a result, it is hypothesised that once past a certain age, LH would gain more competence in using the 'to' infinitive appropriately and correctly when its use is enhanced by further reinforcements.

II. Analysis of Spoken Mandarin and Malay

Earlier on in this paper, it was hypothesized that as a dominant language, the child's spoken Mandarin would be structurally better in terms of lexis and grammar as it was the subject's dominant language. However, there are instances where the hypothesis was not demonstrated. For instance, the subject did not have the relevant word in Mandarin but he has it in English or Malay. As a result of using a word from another language, code switching became the strategy for communicating meanings.

Sample 11. LH is having a conversation with his mom

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	LH	Mommy, ostrich ker yee Chiang hwak ter ma? (Md. Can the ostrich talk?) (M shook her head.)
T2	LH	Ostrich ker yee Chang ker terk ma? (Md. Can the ostrich sing?)
T3	M	No.
T4	LH	(Pointing to an advertisement) Chor mok ta (ostrich) ker yee Chang ker terk? (Md. How come it can sing?)
T5	M	It's an advert.
T6	LH	It's a toy only hoh?

1. Code switching at the word level

Code switching is a normal interactional phenomenon in Malaysia (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992, David, 1996, 2001, Kow, 2003 and Hafriza Burhanuddin, 2003). Those who interact among themselves seem to be 'fleeing between Malay and English' or 'English–Malay' as observed by Hafriza (2003) and as this happens in most situations, it could be a common strategy used by Malaysian speakers. Kuang, David and Zuraidah (2006)'s study projected how even very young children in Malaysian homes code switch while David, Kuang, and Zuraidah's (2002) study also provided evidence to show that Malaysian also code switch in their written discourses like emails. The phenomena of code switching is a common communicative strategy employed by most Malaysians particularly when they are faced with some kind of linguistic barrier such as memory loss, a lack in vocabulary, difficulty in making oneself understood and when trying to make sense (David, 1996).

Sample 11 shows a conversation between LH and his mother who was using English with him while he seemed to be using Mandarin. The most obvious feature of the utterances identified in this sample is the child's ability to show that he understood and was able to distinguish between what is real (Ostrich cannot sing) and what is myth (television showing a singing ostrich). LH demonstrated this cognitive ability by code switching. In T1, LH code switched at the lexical level using the English word 'ostrich' possibly because he did not have the Mandarin equivalent. He then proceeded to ask in Mandarin, '*...ker yee Chiang hwak ma?*' and the same understanding of reality was further demonstrated through a question form in T4 where he asked, '*chor mok ta ker yee Chang ker terk?*' LH then completed his mother's statement by saying in English (see T6), 'It's a toy only, hoh?'

This code switching instance indicates that a three-year old trilingual would resort to code switching when he is unable to proceed in one language completely. In this case, when LH did not have the Mandarin equivalent for 'ostrich', he used the English term within a Mandarin utterance. Other instances of code switching also followed as seen in the samples provided below. The three-year old subject code switched from Mandarin to English and then English to Mandarin and Malay.

Throughout this study, it has been indicated that Mandarin serves as the child's dominant language and the child's utterances in Mandarin should be well-formed. However, despite being exposed to Mandarin more, there were instances where the use of English terms exceeded the use of Mandarin terms. Such a phenomenon suggests that his command of Mandarin vocabulary may not be as strong as his command of English vocabulary but it may also indicate that he had forgotten the Mandarin word. As a result, he had to resort to using a term borrowed from another language. The samples below demonstrate that English serves as a more dominant language for LH particularly where specific terms are concerned. It is these terms in English which enabled LH

to convey his meanings through code switching instances.

Sample 12. LH takes two apples in his hands

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	LH	I don't want ini .
T2	LH	Mi, I don't want [to] eat this [red] apple.
T3	LH	This [one] [is] not nice lah.

In Sample 11, above, code switching occurred at the word level when LH inserted the English term, 'ostrich' into a Mandarin utterance. Likewise, code switching at the word level also occurred in two instances as is evidenced in Sample 12 above and Sample 13 below. In these two samples, LH interjected a word of another language into the matrix language of the utterance. For example in Sample 12, LH inserted the Malay word, 'ini' which means 'this' in his utterance in T1 on his own accord. The occurrence is probably due to the influence of a previous utterance which may have been articulated by a prior speaker in Malay and as we are aware, in some situations, a subsequent speaker tends to become influenced by the language use of an earlier speaker. From this data, it is deduced that the insertion of a Malay term into an English utterance was due to the mood of the child who could be playfully using the Malay term which he had learnt and understood. Besides this there could be other possible factors. After T1, the conversation then proceeded to be spoken in Malaysian English structures which are illustrated in T2 and T3. The data in Sample 12 also illustrate the child's lack of ability in using the 'to' infinitive as shown in T2 as well as his lack of ability to use the verb, 'is' appropriately. These two factors have been duly discussed in the analysis of earlier samples above.

2. Code switching of three languages

Code switching did not just occur at the word level but also at other levels. Sample 13 below demonstrates how code switching occurs at two levels. In Sample 13, the utterance in T1 shows that LH began an utterance in Mandarin which was preceded by the English term of address, 'mommy'. This change of term of address was not treated as an instance of code switching because despite being an English term, it is commonly used by speakers of other languages. Thus should this term appear in a Mandarin construction, it would not be deemed as code switching. Data in Sample 13 show that LH spoke in Mandarin at T1 but by T3 he had switched to English, and that within that utterance, he also inserted a Malay term, 'berak'. In T3, LH used English in structuring subject and verb, 'I want', appropriately and the utterance illustrates that he was also able to use the 'to' infinitive well. However, midway in his utterance, he broke into Malay to complete his utterance. Thus, from Sample 13, we see the phenomenon of code switching occurring at two levels: a) Switching from L1 to L2 and b) Inserting a word from L3 into an L2 structure. The utterance in T3 depicts a sensible and clever move of the child speaker as his utterance provides evidence which shows that he could insert a Malay verb in concordance with an English structure. The same sample also illustrates the child's ability to use the discourse filler 'erm'.

Sample 13: LH wants to go to the toilet to clear his bowels

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	LH	LH: (suddenly) Mommy, wo yau ta pien. (Md. Mommy, I need to poo.)
T2	M	M: Hmm, should be English (as she activates herself).
T3	LH	LH: Erm.. mommy, I want to berak. (Malay for poo)

The strategy of code switching appears to be a commonly used strategy and in this study, the three-year old child appeared to rely on it as a strategy to express himself. This has been duly discussed in the analysis of Samples 12 and 13 above. Code switching instances also appear in the data of Sample 14 below.

Sample 14: Both M and LH are watching an advertisement for traveling. The advert shows two ostriches running around. One talked as a human does and also sang in the advertisement

Turns	Speakers	Utterances
T1	M	What show is this?
T2	LH	<i>Sze "Soong Ai Ling"</i> . (It's Soong Ai Ling's programme.)
T3	M	What show is this?
T4	LH	"DragonBall" <i>lah</i> , donno <i>ah</i> ?

3. Code switching at the sentence level

From the data shown in Sample 14 above, it can be seen that LH demonstrated that he understood his mother in English but chose to respond in Mandarin as is evidenced in T1 (mother's question in English) and in T2 (LH's response in Mandarin). However when his mother asked again in English as is shown in T3, LH opted to answer in English as is shown in T4. It is unclear why this kind of switch occurs but it is presumed that when LH responded in Mandarin in T2, he was talking about a programme that was portrayed in Mandarin whereas when he was talking about the other programme in T4, the programme was portrayed in English. Thus, one may come to the conclusion that the child speaker's choice of language was determined by the language of the TV programmes which he was watching.

Conclusion/discussion

From this study it is clear that a trilingual child who is learning to acquire three languages simultaneously is able to provide us with the evidence to demonstrate the various aspects of his grammatical development which may indicate some as containing well-formed structures and some as containing deviant (developmental) structures. In some instances of the deviant structures, it was obvious that these were due to the interference of his dominant language or L1. In other instances, it seemed clear that it was due to his delayed competence. As the findings have indicated, although the child's dominant language may be Mandarin, there are aspects of his spoken Mandarin which clearly indicate that when speaking in Mandarin, he was incapacitated by lexical gaps, and that to overcome these gaps, the subject resorted to using the lexical items of another known language such as English or Malay. As a result, he code switched. Alternatively, despite having a lesser exposure to English, this study showed that the child speaker's competence in this language may range from being grammatical and thus well-formed to being ungrammatical thus deviant in structure. As a result, it was described as being

inconsistent. For instance, in terms of lexis, he appeared to have more English vocabulary than Mandarin. Additionally, at some points of his utterances, the grammatical competence was commendable. However, at other points of his utterances the same grammatical components which had been depicted as being grammatical appeared to be missing. In addition, as the spoken variety of English was Malaysian English, the trilingual child's spoken data appear to be of this variety with certain grammatical components being absent as is a common factor in the Malaysian English variety. Further, in looking at the development of the languages of Mandarin and English, it was difficult to say which one of these two were comparatively better developed since the trilingual speaker showed inconsistencies. Where the third language of Malay was concerned, there were clear signs that LH was still in the process of acquiring the language as utterances were vocalized at the word level, that is, single words were being articulated each time the language was used. What seems clear based on the analysis of data is the fact that where the child did not have the ability to vocalize his thoughts whether in English or Malay as a complete utterance, he code mixes his utterance, thus creating a perfect balance of inserting a foreign verb such as *berak* into an English construction that was grammatically well-formed.

The data for this study have shown the developmental structures of one trilingual child's ability to speak in three languages, with the two dominant ones still experiencing a stage of development as is shown by the instances of confusion and inconsistent grammatical structures. Where the acquisition of the third language, Malay, is concerned, it would definitely require more data to make firmer conclusions. Sociolinguistically speaking, LH demonstrated some evidence of being a competent speaker and an active participant of a conversation. This is evidenced by the use of discourse markers like 'erm' as a strategy to pause and think. Additional evidence can be seen from his ability to use 'wow' and 'very nice' in his utterances to display compliments. Further, part of his utterances were articulated as a way of directing an older speaker who was a little lost; LH showed this ability by using phrases such as 'like this, like this'.

Also, what could very clearly be detected from this study is that a trilingual child is never incapacitated in his desire to communicate what he wishes to express to others. The child apparently has his own strategies. One of these was to rely on the various terms available in the three languages existing in his linguistic repertoire. This provided him with the accessibility of numerous words to use whenever one language failed to provide him with the appropriate vocabulary. By falling back on the use of those terms which were accessible to him, the subject was simultaneously demonstrating his communicative strategies and resourcefulness in using language. Based on those benefits which a trilingual child seems to gain, it would thus seem like a very good idea to allow young children to be simultaneously exposed to various languages.

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