BRIDGING MEANING FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLS) USING CULTURALLY EXISTING TOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how New Zealand early childhood teachers support Asian immigrant English language learners (ELLs) as they acquire English from sociocultural perspectives. Data gathering included observations and pre- and post-observation interviews with the participants. Various strategies have been employed to support ELLs' English acquisition including how the teachers bridge meaning in their interactions with the ELLs using culturally existing tools. Seven teachers and five Asian ELLs participated in this qualitative study captures the richness of the teachers' strategy as they bridge meaning for the ELLs to acquire English. Findings highlighted that some teachers and the ELLs supported their joint efforts by trying to bridge their different perspectives using culturally existing tools such as words, gestures, social referencing, and inter subjectivity. The findings support the New Zealand Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which advocates that children develop through active participation in activities with collaboration from teachers and other children.

Key Words: early childhood, english language learners, asian, new zealand

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand is increasingly becoming more diverse in language and culture as a result of immigration. The change of immigration policy in the 1990s created an unprecedented influx of Asian immigrants and refugees into New Zealand (Guo, 2002). The Asians included in the fieldwork for this study are from East and South East Asia. The Asian population in New Zealand is very diverse, with settlers from all areas within Asia and from other countries with large Asian diasporas, together with a growing locally born population. There are two well-established groups with a long history of settlement: people of Indian ethnicities (23% born in New Zealand) and people of Chinese ethnicities (22% born in New Zealand). While it is often convenient to refer to these groups as 'Chinese ethnic group' and 'Indian ethnic group', this is quite misleading because, in both cases, these labels subsume a very diverse group of ethnicities. These include people born in New Zealand, as well as people born in a number of Asian, European and Pacific countries (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

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. 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. During this process, the early childhood teachers' support is crucial to ensure successful English acquisition.

Using the framework of sociocultural perspectives, this study investigated the teachers' beliefs and practices as they support the Asian ELLs to acquire English. Bridging meaning using culturally existing tools emerged as a sub-theme from one of the main themes which was guided participation. Bridging meaning is discussed in the context of the Asian immigrant ELLs' English acquisition as they engaged in meaningful activities through their nonverbal and verbal social interactions with the teachers, parents and peers. Cultural tools and symbols are the core concepts emphasised by Vygotsky. Mediation is a central concept of sociocultural theories' approach to second language acquisition (Lantolf, 2000). A fundamental principle in sociocultural theories is that human psychological processes are mediated by psychological and material tools such as the symbolic system of language (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Lantolf, 2006; Swain & Deters, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Language is the most persistent and powerful symbolic tool that humans possess to mediate their connection to the world, to each other and to themselves (Aimin, 2013). Wertsch (2007) noted that language serves as a symbolic tool to facilitate social activities, and children's appropriation of language is in and through these activities. However, children's early appropriation of language is implicit since the main function of interaction is not usually language learning but also learning other aspects, including how to participate appropriately in social activities (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

Literature Review

Bridging meaning using culturally existing tools, is one of the processes in guided participation theorised by Rogoff (2003). Rogoff (1990) argued that teachers, community institutions, and children's own choices mutually determine the circumstances in which children are available and have opportunities to learn.

Mediation by Symbolic Artifacts

While second language learners gain greater control over the use of their new language through progressing through stages of regulation, symbolic artifacts mediate their psychological processes. Within sociocultural theories, humans use symbolic artifacts for two main reasons: firstly, as tools to mediate psychological activities and secondly, to control psychological process (Gass & Mackey, 2000). Gass (2013) argued that the control is voluntary, and allows humans to think about particular things, to plan, and to think rationally. In the same vein, Vygotsky (1978) argued that humans have the ability to use symbols, not to control the environment but to mediate their own psychological activity. He suggested that while physical tools are supporting means to enhance the ability to control and change the physical world, symbolic tools serve as supporting means to control and reorganise human psychological processes. The primary tool that humans have available is language and therefore language gives the capacity to humans to go beyond the immediate environment and to think, and talk about events and objects that are far removed (Gass, 2013; Gass & Mackey, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). In the SLA context, second language learners use language as symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect or mediated relationship between themselves and the world (Lantolf, 2007, 2009, 2011).

In all human cultures language serves as a universal tool. Language is described as a cultural tool as it is formed and shared by all members of a specific culture. Language is also defined as a symbolic tool because each member of the culture uses language to think (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Vygotsky (1978) noted that using language actively represents

two distinct expressions of the social area. Firstly, psychological tools are social in the sense that they are products of the social cultural system in which individuals use these products practices. Secondly, the tools are social in the sense that they are utilised in the process of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky (1978) studied language in two ways. The first is to make links between language and thoughts (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Kozulin, 1998) in which he theorised the relationship between cognitive development and language (Wink & Putney, 2002). The second is to consider language as a device that serves specific social practices (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). During the developmental process, children become active participants in their learning through the use of language and interactions with others (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, Wink & Putney, 2002). Vygotsky (1978) claimed that children use language, in the act of speaking, as a tool for developing thought, and at the same time, they develop language through thought. This reciprocal relationship allows children to realise that the social action of using language can lead to cognitive development (Wink & Putney, 2002). Interaction of thinking and speech results in experience for the learner and Vygotsky viewed this experience as an important factor in further impacting the relationship of thinking and speech (Wink & Putney, 2002). Therefore, Vygotsky (1978) claimed that language and thought are interactive dynamics and bound together.

Besides of the role of language in supporting thinking, Vygotsky (1978) perceived language as a tool for social operations. Language assists individuals to employ their social roles and the use of a language is "cultural practice with specific rules and tools in socially appropriate ways" (van Oers & Poland, 2007, p. 300). Vygotsky (1978; 1986) argued that language shapes the mind to function in the most efficient way for a particular culture. Since language is both a social and cultural tool, delays in its development have consequences. Language delays impact other areas of development including motor, social and cognitive (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Mediation through gestures

Vygotsky (1986) regarded gestures as having an important role in the development of language. Vygotsky (1986) further noted that intentionality develops out of gestures in conjunction with a child's word. "The word at first is a conventional substitute for the gesture: it appears long before the crucial discovery of language and before he is capable of logical operations" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 65). This notion indicates that gestures are where the child first comes into contact in a meaningful way with semiotic (study of meaning) mediation, thus this is an essential aspect of being human (McCafferty & Ahmed, 2000).

One of the most insightful areas of sociocultural theories in relation to second language acquisition research deals with the appropriation and use of gestures as a form of mediation (Lantolf, 2006). There are two general areas of interest. The first area investigates the extent to which second language learners are able to appropriate gestures that are specific to particular meaning (McCafferty, 2002; McCafferty & Ahmed, 2000). The second area studies the interface between speech and gestures as it relates to Slobin's (2003) thinking for speaking hypothesis (Lantolf, 2000a, 2000b). McCafferty (2004) claimed that there is a close connection between speech and gesture that goes beyond social communication. Gesture can contribute to the development of thinking and, as such, can function as "a separate, spatio-motoric mode of thinking" (p. 149). Vygotsky (1997) observed that speech is at first "a

conventional substitute for the gesture" (p. 98) in child development and he perceived a close connection between gesture and symbolic play.

Gesture is generally understood as manual movements that frequently occur in the absence of speech (Lantolf, 2000a, 2001; Negueruela, Lantolf, Jordan,& Gelabert, 2004) such as when someone waves to indicate that he or she is leaving. These types of gestures can be interpreted independently of speech (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). According to McNeill (2005), speech and gesture form a unit of thinking that he called 'growth point', a notion closely related to Vygotsky's concept of inner speech or private speech (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The growth point of a speech combines one verbal and one imagistic into a single meaning system (McNeill & Duncan, 2000). It is important to note that each component of the growth point has "unique semiotic properties," each can exceed "the meaning possibilities of the other" (McNeill & Duncan, 2000, p. 144). Vygotsky (1978) and McNeill and Duncan (2000) suggested that gestures are "material carriers of thinking" (p. 155) and therefore provide "an enhanced window into mental processes" (p. 144).

Lantolf and Thorne (2006a, 2007) argued that second language speakers clearly seem to rely on gesture both to assist them access words in their second language and as a means of requesting mediation from others. McCafferty and Ahmed (2000) claimed that the appropriation of conceptual metaphors among second language learners is manifested through gestures. Concepts, according to Vygotsky (1997), are culturally organised artifacts that play a central role in regulating one's mind. Vygotsky (1986; 1997) argued that words do not have meanings that stand independently from other words; rather word meanings are organised into networks that, taken together, and form concepts.

Internationalisation

Internalisation is the second core concept of Vygotsky's theory in my study's theoretical framework and the relevance of this concept will be discussed in the light of second language acquisition. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) called an internal reconstruction of an external operation 'internalisation' (p. 56). Vygotsky (1978) illustrated this process by using the development of pointing. In the beginning the gesture of pointing for a baby is nothing more than an unsuccessful attempt to grasp something. However, when the mother comes to the child's aid and realises his pointing gesture, the situation changes fundamentally. Consequently, the primary meaning of the pointing gesture becomes a gesture for others. Its meaning and functions are first created by an objective situation and then by people who surround the child (Vygostky, 1978; 1986).

As the above description of pointing illustrates, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) explained that the process of internalisation consists of a series of transformations. The first transformation is an operation that initially represents an external activity which is reconstructed and begins to occur internally (Vygotsky, 1978;1986). The second transformation involves an interpersonal (between people) process first and then an intrapersonal (inside the child) process (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). Finally, the transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986).

Imitation

Vygotsky proposed that the key to internalisation resides in the uniquely human capacity to imitate the intentional activity of human activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). According to Vygotsky (1978) imitation is the process through which socioculturally constructed forms of mediation are internalised. One of the earliest social scientists to propose imitation as a uniquely human form of development was James Mark Baldwin (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a). According to Baldwin:

> Imitation to the intelligent and earnest imitator is never slavish, never mere repetition; it is on the contrary, a means for further ends, a method of absorbing what is present in others and making it over in forms peculiar to one's own temper and valuable to one's own genius". (cited in Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000, p. 153)

In the second language acquisition context, Tomasello's (2003) usage-based theory considers the role of imitation. He argued that imitation is not a simple copy of what others say, but it is an intentional and self-selective behaviour on the child's part. The view of language acquisition that best complements sociocultural theories is predicated on the innately specified human capacity to interpret and imitate the means through which we realise intentions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006b). Tomasello's theory emphasised utterance which is necessarily instilled with the intention of the user. Tomasello (2003) claimed that a child uses linguistic symbols in utterances as a social act, and when this act is internalised in Vygostkian theory, the product is a unique kind of cognitive representation. Additionally, Tomasello (2003) argued that a child's utterances can also be perspectival in the sense that the child understands that the same referent could have been indicated in some other way.

Tomasello (2003) stated that children begin to acquire language during the learning process which depends critically on the more fundamental skills of joint attention, intention-reading, and cultural learning. This attention is important because it helps a learner notice a mismatch between what he or she knows about the second language and what is produced by speakers of the second language. From this perspective, Lantolf and Thorne (2006a, 2006b; 2007) viewed language as a special and complex type of attentional skill that people employ to influence and manipulate one another's attention. Tomasello (2003) emphasised that how children become competent users of language is an empirical rather than a logical problem. In the context of second language learners' development, learning or development is encapsulated in sociocultural theories' construct of ZPD, defined as a distance between what a learner can do in second language learning if assisted by others compared to what he or she can accomplish alone.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky (1978) explained that humans cannot limit themselves merely to determining developmental levels if they wish to discover the actual relations of the developmental process to learning capabilities. Hence, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that humans must determine at least two developmental levels. The first level is referred to as an "actual developmental level" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85), which means the level of development of a child's mental functions that has been established as a result of certain already completed developmental cycles (Vygotsky, 1978). The second level is the ZPD which takes account of not only the cycles and maturation processes that have already been completed but also those processes that are currently in the state of formation.

Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as "the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). If a child can solve a problem independently, it means that the functions for that problem solving have already matured in the child. In the ZPD, a child cannot solve a problem independently unless with assistance. The ZPD defines that the functions for that problem solving have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation (Vygotsky, 1978).

The ZPD is also a way of conceptualising the relationship between learning and development (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Wink & Putney, 2002). The word 'zone' was chosen by Vygotsky because he conceived development as a continuum of behaviours or degree of maturation, not as a point on a scale (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). The skills and behaviours represented in the ZPD by children are dynamic and constantly changing. A child who may need some assistance in doing something today may do the same thing independently tomorrow as the child internalises the new idea (Wink & Putney, 2002).

Vygotsky (1962) believed that as children learn new words they internalise the meanings of the words they say. As children begin to use and internalise new words in the presence of a knowledgeable other person, they often find themselves in the ZPD for new learning. The concept of internalisation is inseparable from the ZPD (Aimin, 2013). Lantolf (2007) claimed that it is through the internalisation of the ZPD that the activities between people and cultural artifacts transform into the inner activities of the human brain.

As stated earlier, imitation is the most effective method to promote internalisation in second language acquisition. Vygotsky (1978; 1986) claimed that children can imitate a variety of actions, including a new language that goes well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. However, Aimin (2013) argued that imitation can occur with a delay of a day or more after the child is exposed to a pattern of new language. Deferred imitation permits the child to analyse language 'off-line' and is considered a continuum between imitation and spontaneous language production (Aimin, 2013; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). In this case, deferred imitation serves as an essential building block for spontaneous speech (Aimin, 2013; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

There have been a substantial number of empirical studies that examined strategies used by teachers to bridge meaning using culturally existing tools with ELLs during interactions. Facella, Rampino and Shea (2010) studied strategies that teachers deemed effective for bridging meaning within the ELLs' ZPD. Twenty early childhood teachers who taught from pre-kindergarten to second grade in two culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Massachusetts were interviewed about the strategies that they found effective and why they felt these strategies worked. The findings highlighted four strategies that were named by the majority of the teachers as being effective in general: gestures and visual cues; repetition and opportunities for practising English language; use of objects, real props and hands-on materials; and multi-sensory approaches. The teachers mentioned that the main goals of using these strategies, among many others mentioned in this study, included helping ELLs to make the connection between content and language, and providing ELLs with the tools they needed to use English to interact with the teachers and peers in the centre. By understanding learners' characteristics and teaching strategies appropriate for each stage, the study suggested that teachers can offer support while ELLs acquire English.

Facella, Rampino and Shea's (2010) study reported on what teachers perceived as effective strategies; however, their study did not address whether the teachers employed those strategies while they worked with the ELLs. Craighead and Ramanathan's (2007) observational study investigated teachers' interactions found to advance the ELLs' learning. The participants were three experienced teachers with at least three years' teaching experience with ELLs. Data gathering included six observations and nine pre- and post- observation interviews with the participants who taught English to school children of the age between seven and thirteen years attending a Midwestern middle school. During pre- observation interviews, the teachers listed several verbal interaction practices they claimed were beneficial for teaching ELLs such as verbal praise and restating information. This study discovered 'inhibiting factors' as the main theme of their findings. Although the teachers were experienced teachers and were welcoming of the ELLs in their classes, the strategies that the teachers claimed were effective during the pre-observations interviews were either not evident or the teachers did not have the confidence to address the issues that ELLs have. For example, 'direct help from the teachers' was one of the strategies emphasised by the teachers; however, it was not evident that teachers employed this particular strategy effectively. The teachers claimed that inhibiting factors were having more difficulty relating personally with the ELLs than with the English speaking children in the classroom because of language and cultural barriers. This difficulty was exacerbated because the ELLs did not typically request clarification verbally from teachers in the classroom setting. Interestingly, the same teaching strategies proved to be successful with the English speaking children. One important implication of this finding is that the strategies which worked effectively with English speaking children might not be adequate in fully meeting the needs of ELLs.

Baharun and Zakaria (2013) examined oral discourse produced by 18 Malaysian public university students who learn English as a second language, using two different communication task types: jigsaw and decision-making. Specifically, this study investigated how the learners approached and processed the tasks and how they interacted during task completion. The data for the study comprised transcribed recordings of learner interactions when working on given tasks. The data were qualitatively analysed focusing on cognitive and social processing. The cognitive processing offered an understanding as to how the participants approached and processed the task, while the social processing provided an insight into how the participants interacted during task completion. Findings showed that both task types promoted episodes of negotiated interaction when the participants attempted task completion. However, close examination showed that the participants engaged in more intensive negotiations which were exploratory in nature and highly collaborative during decision-making task completion than during task completion of the jigsaw task type. The participants took the effort to explain, clarify, and even translate the English words to Malay language when their friend did not understand the English words in order to provide feedback to the group member. The results suggest that different task types elicit different kinds of interaction from the learners, and how the participants approached and processed the tasks shaped the kind of learner interactions they generated.

Similarly, Foster and Ohta (2005) investigated the value of language classroom negotiation of meaning from both cognitive and sociocultural perspectives. The participants were twenty young adults from various first language backgrounds studying intermediate level English language at a language academy in London. The data were gathered during an interactive classroom task where second language learners were observed to employ negotiation of meaning strategies such as clarification requests, comprehension and confirmation checks. The incidents of these negotiation moves were recorded only when

communication problems were clearly signalled. The quantitative result showed that the incidence of negotiation of meaning was very low. The qualitative analysis of the data subsequently investigated what was going on in the long stretches of interaction that lacked any signs of meaning negotiation. The findings suggested that learners actively assist each other to transact the task through co-construction and prompting. The learners expressed interest and encouragement while seeking and providing assistance and initiating self-repair of their own utterances, all in the absence of communication breakdown. The findings also claimed that comprehensible input appeared to be of lower priority than maintaining supportive and friendly discourse.

Methods

A qualitative design has been chosen for this study. As the primary instrument for data gathering and data analysis in this study, I aimed to investigate how New Zealand early childhood teachers support ELLs to support their English acquisition.

Selection criteria for the sites to be studied represented early childhood services and programmes which operated on similar programmes. The more demographically similar the participants are the better a researcher's ability to understand the 'general' nature of the experience to be defined (Creswell, 2007). In this study, I narrowed down the demographics of the participants to the extent that I was able to find a sufficient number of participants to validate the study. The selection of participants was based on a discussion with the head teachers, an analysis of their centre documentation, identification of the centre philosophies, and expected practices. The data from these discussions and documents provided an overview of philosophies and programmes of each ECE centre. An important criterion is the linguistic diversity of the children attending the ECE centres which was identified at this stage to ensure that a suitable sample number of child participants was available. Two ECE centres which met the selection criteria were selected to provide the data. This decision was also made in order to meet the expectations about depth and quality, as well as the completion of the study within the time frame.

The ethics approval for this study was granted by the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee (ERHEC) of University of Canterbury Ethics. Thus, this study was conducted in accordance with ethical norms and was subject to ethical appraisal and approval of both its means and ends as required by ERHEC of University of Canterbury.

Data gathering stages

Data gathering involved three stages. For each participant a pre-observation interview, a videotaped observation, and a post-observation interview were conducted. The purpose of the pre-observation interview was to collect background information and data about each participant's beliefs. Semi-structured (i.e., open-ended) interviews were conducted in a pilot study and a second interview protocol was developed on the basis of teachers' feedback obtained in the pilot study. The revised interview questions were used in the second stage of the study. The findings were analysed thematically. The purpose of thematic analysis was to interpret emergent themes across the full set of interviews while the purpose of interpretive analysis was to discuss implications of the teachers' beliefs and practices. Observations

Patton (2002) argued that "naturalistic observations take place in the *field* [emphasis in original]" (p. 262). There were several advantages of entering the field work when I carried out my pilot project. I was better able to understand and capture the ECE context within which early childhood teachers interacted with the ELLs through direct observation. This first-hand experience with the ECE setting and the people in the setting allowed me to be open and discovery oriented, without relying on prior conceptualisations of the setting. Understanding the context of my study was essential to providing a holistic perspective. I also had the opportunity to see things that routinely escaped awareness among the people in the setting and discovered things that paid less attention.

The first and most fundamental distinction that differentiates observational strategies concerns the extent to which an observer will be a participant in the setting being studied (Patton, 2002). Merriam (2009) claimed that in reality, researchers are rarely total participants or total observers. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) argued that being a participant observer is more difficult for many doctoral students as it is time-consuming. Therefore, I tried to stay sufficiently detached to observe and analyse during my fieldwork.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) claimed that most qualitative researchers do not do their fieldwork at more than one site at a time to avoid confusion and too much diverse data to manage. Occasionally, the researchers may return to the earlier sites to collect additional data but the field work is not carried out simultaneously (Bogdan & Bilen, 2007; Creswell, 2012). By adopting this approach, it enabled me to improve my technique for subsequent case studies after I finished with the first case study. Furthermore, the first case study had provided a focus to define the parameters of the other case studies.

Data Analysis

Holloway and Todres (2003) argued that qualitative research is very diverse, and complicated. Braun and Clarke (2006) claimed that thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis. 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' beliefs and practices in supporting English acquisition among ELLs. I read and reread the field notes, listened to the audio recordings of interviews with teachers and watched the videotapes several times to gain sensitivity to the entire data. I jotted down early impressions that I thought would be significant for the analysis. These reflective notes were not analysed or included in the case description but they assisted me to analyse the data and reminded me of how and why I understood something when it happened during this fieldwork.

The second step of the data analysis was to scrutinise the data to develop preliminary codes for clustering around topics. It involved extracting the notes and transcripts that directly pertained to understanding early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices in supporting English acquisition among ELLs and putting aside data which were not relevant to the research phenomenon. Although certain codes were developed during the preliminary stage, coding topics was not a static process in this data analysis as later thoughts about including other items were also part of the data development analysis.

The final stage of the data analysis was to discover the themes. This was achieved through close examination of the data and studying the preliminary codes many times to see

whether some of them illustrated a similar point. From the initial codes, I identified keywords, phrases and sentences that indicated similarities in the early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices in supporting English acquisition among ELLs and grouped these together. As I read and listened, I searched for patterns and meanings among all the initial codes. I looked across the transcripts and notes to reorganise the segmented codes to establish links with this research questions. Then I defined and named the main themes, and identified sub-themes within the main 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.

One of the main themes that emerged from the data analysis was 'Guided participation'. The theme 'Guided participation' was further discussed in the context of the sub-theme which was 'Bridging meaning for ELLs using culturally existing tools'.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore how early childhood teachers support Asian ELLs as they acquire English. The findings highlighted that the teachers bridge meaning using culturally existing tools to support the ELLS' English acquisition. My study revealed that the teachers and the ELLs supported their joint efforts by trying to bridge their different perspectives using culturally existing tools such as words, gestures, social referencing, and intersubjectivity.

Words and gestures

In her interview, Angela, the English speaking teacher at the second centre, revealed that it was important for her to understand how to find common perspectives, in order to engage in interactions with the ELLs. She commented:

> *Certainly with those verbal interactions [in the effort of finding common perspectives] and the children learning English, I think it is important that the teachers do have a bit of understanding [how to engage in interactions with ELLs] and I have a little. I don't have a lot because I haven't had any specific training in it, but just using those short sentences and having things repeated.*

Angela admitted that she did not have much knowledge, due to lack of specific training on how to find common perspectives so that she would be able to understand the ELLs through social interaction. However, in her practice, Angela and Shin[1] were observed to mutually bridge the meanings by using words and gestures as illustrated in the following scenario:

> Shin was holding a pig at a railway track table. At the railway track table, some of the trains were on the railway track. Angela came and rearranged the train back on the railway track. Angela saw Shin lift the pig in the air again, and he walked around and came back to Angela.
>
> Angela: Can your pig fly? (When Shin was holding a pig in the air)
> Shin: (shaking his head)

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[1] Shin was a case study child of the second centre.

Angela: No?

Shin: (Smiling, nodded)

Angela: Does your pig have any friends?

Shin: (shaking his head)

Angela: No, he's happy by himself?

Shin: (Smiling, nodded)

Angela: You can put him on the train, if you want? (While putting the train back on the track)

Shin: (shaking his head, smiling)

Angela: (did not look at Shin, instead pushing the train on its track while making the 'choo' sound).

Shin: (touched Angela's hand with the pig a few times to attract Angela's attention and squeezed the pig a few times) I'm hungry!

Angela: Oh, hello Pig. Are you hungry? Here's the blue berry muffin (pretended to take the muffin from the coach and feed the pig).

Shin: (Smiling) Nyum nyum... I…I…I... (looked like he wanted to say something) erm...Birthday! (A girl approached Shin and wanted to play with him)

Angela: Choo..Choo…Bye-bye Pig!

Although there was not much verbal interaction, I was interested to find out Angela's view on her and Shin's participation in that scenario and she commented:

I'm not quite sure with the pig; whether he just wanted to be silly with the pig, not really wanting to extend and I was trying to get him to engage and he didn't, he didn't want to, but he kept coming back to me. So I think that probably that eye contact was quite important in that one, that he was just ...[pause], he didn't look like he wanted to do - I don't know what he wanted to do with the pig, but he wanted to do it with me.

When Angela was watching the scenario between her and Shin, she was not sure whether Shin was interested in engaging in their interactions. According to Angela, Shin appeared not to be interested in interacting but he kept coming back to her. The scenario was rather ambiguous for Angela. Angela and Shin were observed to bridge their different views through verbal and nonverbal language to communicate their ideas. In the above successive turns between Angela and Shin, it was apparent that Angela relied heavily on nonverbal means of communication in her attempt to bridge meaning when interpreting the ambiguous situation. According to Rogoff (1990), in the context of interaction, caregivers and children link between what the children already know and what they must learn in order to handle a new situation. It was evident in the successive turns that Angela made connection between what Shin knew by asking Shin whether the pig could fly and Shin indicated through his nonverbal means of communication that the pig could not fly.

Although at the beginning of the interaction, Shin chose to participate in the interaction in a nonverbal manner, he began to use English words verbally such as "Toilet", "I'm hungry" in responding to Angela's questions towards the end of their conversation. Shin probably felt confident to use some English words in the context of the activity with Angela as a result of Angela's effort to bridge the meaning with Shin. According to Angela, Shin was at the stage where he actually had a lot more English than he was using but because Shin was going through a quiet time, he did not feel confident in using English during their interaction. Therefore, Angela and Shin were observed to modify their interactions in order to achieve

understanding about the activity that Shin was engaged in. Rogoff (2003) argued that mutuality in early language use, particularly, was always evident as some children built discussion with others through successive turns that layer upon the child's one word comment.

In summary, Angela and Shin attempted to mutually bridge meaning as they interacted in the activity chosen by Shin. Interaction between Angela and Shin bridged two views of a situation: it built from Shin's starting point, with modifications in the perspectives of Angela and Shin, and in addition, the interaction supported Shin as he acquired English by participating in taking successive turns. Therefore, while Angela and Shin attempted to mutually bridge the meaning, there was evidence that Shin was learning how to use English in the context of his play.

Social referencing

Social referencing is defined as "the child's spontaneous seeking of emotional information from the adult's face when faced with a stimulus of uncertain value" (Bacon, Morris, Waterhouse & Allen, 1998, p. 130). While Asian immigrant parents were not observed to provide guided participation in terms of verbal interactions when they sent and picked up their children from the centres, their nonverbal means of communication were apparent in their attempts to influence their children's social interactions at the centres. My study demonstrated how Seo-yeon[2] and Ji Hun[3] attempted to gain information from the parents' and caregivers' facial expressions in the following scenario:

> There was a new pre-service teacher who started her first day of placement at the first centre. When Subin brought Seo-yeon that morning, Jennifer, the English speaking teacher, introduced the pre-service teacher to Seo-yeon and Subin. Then, Jennifer left them to do other things. Seo-yeon looked unsure of how he should be reacting to the new teacher. He stood behind Subin, but he was looking at Subin's face a few times when she was talking to the new teacher. Subin appeared to be relaxed and smiled during the conversation with the new teacher. After a while, Seo-yeon moved from his position and stood next to her. Later, when the new teacher asked Seo-yeon what he would like to play with, Seo-yeon looked at Subin. Subin smiled and nodded, giving him an approval look. Seo-yeon, then, went to the play dough area with the new teacher, looking more confident than when he first met the new teacher.

In the above scenario, Subin and Seo-yeon bridged understanding in the ambiguous situation through social referencing. Since that was the first time Seo-yeon and the new teacher met each other at the centre, Seo-yeon seemed to look unsure of how he should react to the teacher, as displayed by his body language when he initially stood behind Subin. However, he was observed looking at Subin's expression a few times before he slowly stood next to her, implying he could be more open with the new teacher. Then, when the new teacher asked him what he would like to play, he once again looked at Subin as he sought information from Subin as to whether he could go with the new teacher. When Subin gave

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[2] Seo-yeon was a case study child of the first centre.
[3] Ji Hun was a case study child of the second centre.

him the information through her nonverbal communication that he could go with the new teacher, Seo-yeon opened up to the teacher by going to the play dough area with her.

I continued my observation of Seo-yeon and the new teacher after Subin left. Seo- yeon seemed to be responding well to the new teacher as they were playing at the play dough area. He answered a few questions when the new teacher asked him questions like "What are you making?", and he answered "Sushi". It was apparent that as Seo-yeon participated in the play-dough activity with the new teacher, he used English to interact with her. Subin's social referencing seemed to provide opportunities for Seo-yeon to participate in activities that helped him to acquire English as he interacted with the new teacher.

In another scenario at the second centre, my study, however, revealed that social referencing might offer a different interpretation of a situation for the children, compared to the scenario at the first centre. Ji Hun's grandmother always brought him in the morning. Most of the time, Ji Hun would cry as he did not want his grandmother to leave him at the centre, as depicted in the following scenario:

> This morning, like other mornings, Ji Hun's grandmother seemed to have a worried look when she brought Ji Hun to the centre. As she could not speak English at all, I noticed that she never had verbal interactions with any of the teachers. In addition, there was no bilingual teacher at the centre who could speak Ji Hun's home language. After she hung Ji Hun's bag and put his lunch box on the trolley, she spoke with Ji Hun briefly. There was a worried expression on her face when she spoke with Ji Hun which appeared to communicate apprehension to Ji Hun through her expression and tone of voice. As they were talking, Ji Hun was looking at his grandmother's facial expression. When she wanted to leave, Ji Hun cried and he held onto his grandmother's jacket. Angela approached Ji Hun, and reassured the grandmother that Ji Hun would be fine at the centre.

Bridging meaning between Ji Hun and his grandmother highlighted that Ji Hun's reaction when his grandmother wanted to leave was likely influenced by his grandmother's nonverbal means of communication. As Ji Hun looked at his grandmother's expression and listened to his grandmother's worried tone as she interacted with him, Ji Hun possibly thought that being left at the centre might not be a pleasurable experience for him; hence the crying.

Ji-Hun's habit, which was crying at the centre, was regarded by Ming and Razan as "unsettled behaviour". In addition, according to Ming, Ji Hun appeared to be a child who was not easily approached by other peers as he was always seen to be playing with Shin only, and therefore limiting his participation with other children, particularly his English speaking peers. His limited participation with other peers was seen to be affecting his opportunities to use English in his social interactions.

In summary, two distinctive scenarios of mutually bridging meaning through social referencing, which involved Seo-yeon and Subin, and Ji Hun and his grandmother, revealed how different social referencing can influence the ELL's perception. These scenarios depicted how social referencing from the adults could influence how children obtained and transmitted information and finally their reactions in some situations. Consequently, the way that Seo-yeon and Ji Hun reacted in those situations was likely to have some impact on their opportunities to engage in social interactions with their peers or teachers which could support their English acquisition. Rogoff (2003) highlighted the fact that bridging meanings through

nonverbal means such as social referencing in an ambiguous situation was a dominant way of obtaining and giving information. Rogoff (1990) claimed that young children were so skilled at obtaining information from adults' glances and moods that one of the greatest challenges of assessing young children was to escape nonverbal actions that may be regarded as cues.

Inter subjectivity

As noted, Rogoff (1990) proposed that a mutual understanding that is achieved between individuals in interactions has been termed intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity can be broadly defined as a person's sense of another person's experience (Rogoff, 1990; 2003). Intersubjectivity focuses on understanding what happens between individuals which cannot be attributed to another individual (Rogoff, 2003).

In a pre-observation interview with Ming, I explored how the friendship between the ELLs and English speaking children helped the ELLs to acquire English. Ming claimed that the more the ELLs and the English speaking peers interacted with each other, the better they understood each other. Ming commented:

> *The children here play with each other a lot. We [teachers] come and go, different days of duties, so we don't get that kind of constant interaction with the children. So, I think, the Asian children and English children can benefit a lot if they understand each other. I mean, when they play, and they get stuck at something, they can help each other. Of course, we can come and help too but I think that children start the play, so they can sometimes help each other, you know, like solve the problem, take turns, and I observe this [helping each other] a lot.*

In the context of guided participation, Ming described the importance of mutually bridging meaning between the ELLs and the English speaking peers. She emphasised that in her observations, the ELLs and the English speaking peers can benefit from each other if they can achieve mutual understanding. For example, they would be able to solve problems as they played together.

As Ming highlighted the role of English speaking peers and the Asian immigrant ELLs, in mutually bridging meaning, I observed a scenario which depicted intersubjectivity as Shin and Lucy were working on a puzzle:

> Ming was at the table observing Shin working on an aeroplane puzzle. Ming asked Shin what was the picture of the puzzle, and Shin answered, "Aeroplane". Lucy, an English speaking child, who had just finished drawing, turned to Shin and asked Shin, "I've done this before. Can I do it, too?" Shin nodded.
> Lucy: Shin, you can take that one (pointing to a piece of puzzle which was closer to Shin)
> Shin: Where?
> Lucy: There… there, that one.
> Shin: This? (holding a piece of the puzzle which had some red pattern on it)
> Lucy: Yes, the red one. I think that's the wing.
> Shin: Wing? Where (to put the piece of the puzzle)?
> Lucy: Put it here (pointing to a space on the puzzle board)
> Shin: Here? (looking unsure)

Lucy: Yes, see, there's some shade of red.
Shin: Ok

In the above scenario, Ming asked Shin what was the overall shape of the puzzle. Then, she let Shin work on the puzzle on his own. Lucy, who happened to be at the same table as Shin, asked Shin whether she could join to help solve the puzzle. As Lucy was an English speaker, she was observed guiding Shin by giving him instructions to take a piece of puzzle which had some shade of red on it. Shin followed Lucy's instructions and asked for clarification when he was not sure of Lucy's instruction. In the scenario, Ming asked Shin whether he knew what the overall puzzle was. Ming's question was to bridge understanding between her and Shin to ensure that Shin perceived the overall puzzle in the same way Ming did. In the interactions between Lucy and Shin, there were some modifications made by both of them. For example, when Shin asked Lucy "This?" to check he had the right piece of puzzle, Lucy modified her input by mentioning the word "red" to confirm Shin's understanding. Rogoff (1990) highlighted that if the focus is on the novice's modification, that modification can be considered as the basis of development. The intersubjectivity that was established in the interactions between Shin and Lucy enabled Lucy to refer to the pieces of the puzzle such as, "this one", "that" so that both of them understood each other while working on the puzzle.

I showed the video to Ming and asked her about her thoughts on the scenario. She commented:

I was asking Shin about the picture of the puzzle — just making sure that Shin knows that it's an aeroplane. Lucy's being helpful here. She's able to help Shin, I know Shin can do it on his own but it may take longer. Since Lucy has done the puzzle before, that's why I think she can tell him (Shin) which piece goes where. And they communicate quite well.

Ming explained that she wanted to make sure that Shin knew the overall puzzle. Although Ming knew that Shin would be able to complete the task on his own, Lucy's help enabled Shin to accomplish the task faster. Ming acknowledged that Shin and Lucy communicated well while working on the puzzle. When I compared Ming's view before the observation of the above scenario, there is a similar aspect of communication which was highlighted by her. Ming emphasised that understanding each other's perspectives was important when the ELLs and the English speaking peers communicate with each other to mutually bridge the meaning.

With regard to intersubjectivity, I presented Ming's views on how English speaking peers might help the Asian immigrant ELLs. Then, I presented a scenario which involved Lucy helping Shin to work on the puzzle. Ming was observing Shin and guided him in the beginning before Lucy came and joined in the activity. Vygotsky (1987) emphasised that intersubjectivity simultaneously provides grounds for communication and supports children's understanding of new information and activities. In the interaction between Lucy and Shin, intersubjectivity was evident because both of them understood what they were referring to by using words that only they understood. Moreover, Lucy and Shin modified each other's interactions in order to reach an understanding of the other person's perspective.

CONCLUSION

Two aspects of mutually bridging meaning which directly and indirectly supported the ELLs as they acquired English. The first aspect of mutually bridging meaning was examined in the social interactions which involved Angela and Shin. In the second aspect, social referencing, I considered how Seo-yeon's and Ji Hun's parents built bridges that helped Seo-yeon and Ji Hun to understand how to act in new situations by providing emotional cues about the nature of the situations and how to behave. Both aspects have the power to influence English acquisition for the ELLs like Shin, Seo-yeon and Ji Hun.

It is my hope that future research will address issues pertaining to how well-equipped the ECE teachers, both bilingual and English speaking are in terms of theories, sound knowledge and pedagogies, regarding how they can effectively support Asian immigrant ELLs. there is a need to offer solid theoretical foundations in second language acquisition (SLA) from sociocultural theories, and SLA related theories in pre-service or professional development courses, to enable teachers to support successful English acquisition among Asian immigrant ELL students. The teachers in the present study were uncertain of how second language acquisition could be supported by sociocultural theories. Hence, relevant theoretical understandings will likely shape the teachers' beliefs and facilitate the teachers to support the ELLs.

This study has broadened the horizons the study in exploring how the early childhood teachers structured the opportunities for the Asian ELLs to participate and engage in activities at the centres. While this study is not conclusive in exploring the early childhood teachers' support to Asian ELLs in the New Zealand context, and the findings are not generalisable to other educational settings, it does offer helpful insights for teachers who work with children who are linguistically and culturally diverse in the complex terrains of early childhood. In conclusion, bridging meaning using culturally existing tools for the ELLs is an important sub-theme in the context of guided participation. Guided participation is a valuable mediational tool for facilitating the ELLs to acquire English as they engage with others and materials and arrangements collaboratively managed by themselves and others (Rogoff, 1990).

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