

Implications for effectiveness in l2 acquisition: a case study

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Abstract

Malaysians' English proficiency has seen an alarming dropping rate in the past few years. This research studies a successful ESL (English as a second language) learner with the purpose of looking into the case's English learning journey over a period of 12 years, and with the hope to find out the implications (possible procedures and strategies) of nurturing a proficient English user in the non-English context in Malaysia. The qualitative research method "reflexivity" was employed. The mother of the sample did reflection in detail and provided evidence of learning and achievements. In addition to the thorough description on the sample's engagement with the target language before formal education, his written works done during primary education and a summative work in secondary 1 were measured and analyzed with a professional web tool "Text Inspector©" in line with CEFR to examine his progression towards the mastery of English. The findings show that, first, early exposure to English greatly familiarises the sample with the use of English; second, rich family literacy plays a key role in a child's L2 acquisition; third, "imitation" can be an excellent strategy for ESL young learners.

Keywords: child L2 acquisition; non-English setting; family literacy; immersion; ESL

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the study of how people learn a second language (L2) in addition to their first language (L1). 'Second Language' can be defined as any other language apart from the first language, no matter it is the second, third or fourth language to the learner. The case in the study has engaged with three languages: Chinese, his mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, and English, a foreign language. The English learning process that contributes to his successful SLA will be the focal study of this research.

ESL Learning in Malaysia

Parents in Malaysia generally have a wish that their children could be well-versed in English as it is nonetheless a language for career and high-tech. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (<https://www.ef.com/ca/epi>), a global survey on language proficiency, in 2011, Malaysia was ranked in the top ten most proficient countries. From 2012 to 2017, Malaysia stayed steadily between the 11th and 14th places. However, there has been an alarmingly significant drop in the ranking over the past three years from the 13th place in 2017 to the 30th place in 2020. The status of proficiency is also downgraded from "high" to unprecedented "moderate" in history.

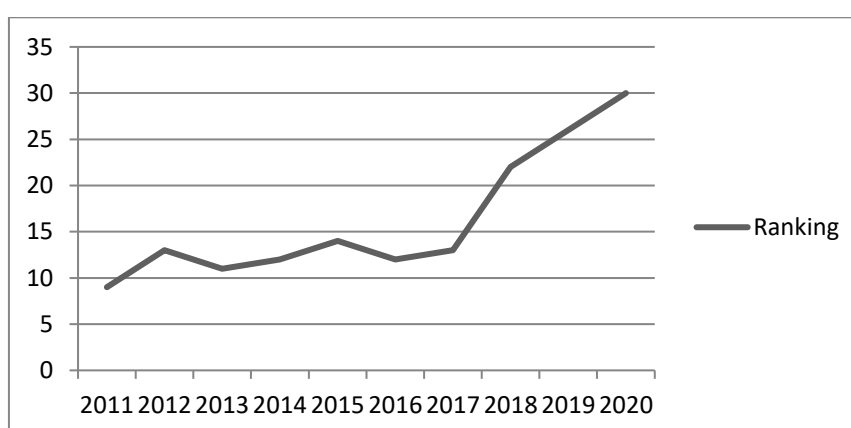


Figure 1. Ranking (Malaysia) in English proficiency 2011-2020

Source: <https://www.ef.com/ca/epi/regions/asia/malaysia/>

The sharp decline of the standard of English has been worrying not only the parents but also the government. As Saad and Yunus (2015) pointed out, despite that English is regarded as a second language in Malaysia, the language is actually learned and used instrumentally at school or at work, the environment is not natural where not everyone is good at speaking English and not every place allows you to use English.

It is a fact that English is used mostly in big cities such as Kuala Lumpur. Most Malaysian families do not make English as their family language. How can a Malaysia-born child learn English in the non-English environment? The child I am going to present has been raised in a mainly Chinese environment. His English learning experience may demonstrate a possible route to success which is significant not only to Malaysia but to other areas without English environments.

2. The Research Purpose

The purpose of the case study is to provide a qualitative description on how an L2 English language learner masters the English language in 12 years from his babyhood to the end of his primary education. The researcher will be looking at his progression through the perspectives of cognitive development, learning styles and the socio-cultural influence such as family literacy. The learner is regarded as a proficient English user based on the criteria of CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). This case will be discussed with relevant theories and literature, and concluded with recommendations with respect to effective English learning in the setting of Malaysia. Therefore, the research question can be:

What is the best procedure for a young child to acquire English as a second language (ESL) in the non-English context?

To protect the confidentiality of the target case, the sample concerned will be referred to as "Tony" from here on.

3. Literature Review

While there is a plethora of studies about adult L2 acquisition, not much research has been conducted relating to bilingualism in the early years particularly involving infants and toddlers. As the current study is focusing on the early acquisition of second language, the literature found will be focusing on the evidence on learning second language at young age, mainly in comparison to adult L2 learning.

3.1 SLA & Age

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) is a crucial concept frequently adopted to explain the differences in L2 acquisition between children and adults. Lenneberg (1967) advocated that the best period to acquire a language was between age two and puberty, after when humans are not able to master a language. It is generally agreed by researchers that "biological change during the first two decades of life results in a reduced capacity for learning and retaining the subtleties of language" (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013).

When it comes to sound acquisition, child L2 learners are faster to acquire phonology than adult learners after 12 to 18 months' exposure to the target language though children do not demonstrate a higher accuracy in pronouncing phonemes in the first 11 months' learning the second language. Noticeably, after the 12th month, children outdo their adult counterparts in acquiring native accents (Winitz et al., 1995; Flege & Mackay, 2011; Paradis, 2008).

In terms of vocabulary learning, however, (Paradis, 2008) summarises that adult L2 learners have the advantage of being cognitively more mature leading to their higher ability in conceptual-lexical mappings, thus older L2 learners are found to learn more vocabulary than younger L2 learners within the same given period of learning time. Hu (2016) gave a conclusion in his study on the age factor in L2 learning that adult learners learn a second language with higher efficiency than young learners, but child learners achieved higher in the long run.

Numerous recent studies have shown that L1 transfer is not as obvious in child L2 acquisition as in adult L2 acquisition (Unsworth & Blom, 2010; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2012; Oroji & Ghane, 2014). The errors occur in child L2 learning are mostly categorized as developmental or overgeneralisation rather than negative transfer of L1. This may also indicate that child L2 learners' process of acquisition is following the similar pattern as L1 children. For example, both L1 and L2 English young learners apply the progressive form (-ing) earlier than the past tense (-ed) in the morpheme acquisition (Dulay et al., 1982).

The famous nativist theory, proposed by (Chomsky, 1965), argues that humans are born with an invisible "language acquisition device (LAD)" which organizes rules of a language. Can the belief that children have language-specific abilities be applicable to child L2 learners? Lakshmanan (1995, abstract) in his studies about the relationship between SLA and universal grammar concluded that "child L2 developing grammars are indeed constrained by Universal Grammar" though it is unclear how much the L1 transfer has affected the acquisition. On the other hand, Haman and her co-researchers (2017) agree that L1 transfer to some extent inhibits the morphosyntax acquisition, but suggest that the amount and type of exposure to the target language help to narrow the gap between L2 learners and L1 learners in grammar performance, with the implication that amount of input of target language could be a "remedial approach" in SLA.

3.2 Confusion in Learning Two Languages

According to the evidenced review by Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams (2013) right at birth, bilingual infants are capable of distinguishing their two rhythmically dissimilar languages like English and French, and by 4th month, they can distinguish similar languages such as French and Spanish, without any sign of confusion. Furthermore, bilingual young learners tend to be more sensitive to the differences between languages than monolingual young learners. Therefore, the fear that a baby gets confused when being exposed to multiple languages may be groundless.

3.2 SLA & Environment

The socio-cultural theory Vygotsky (1962) proposes that children learn language through social interaction and due to a desire to communicate with the world around them. As such, language is acquired depending upon the availability of interactive communication in the environment, meaning that the environment determines, to a large extent, how well and fast we acquire a language. Young children usually experience a very rich language environment. Fernald & Simon (1984) found that very young children hear language in attention grabbing, absorbable chunks that are aimed at purposefully pertinent to their developmental level. Adult learners usually do not have the opportunity to experience this kind of fun, one-on-one interaction with speakers on a constant, everyday basis.

3.4 SLA & Affect

Infants and toddlers are highly egocentric. They take the world around them as part of themselves. As children grow older, they become more aware of their own identity. Guiora and his co-researchers (1972) proposed that the language ego accounts for the identity a person develops in reference to the language used. The child's ego is flexible and dynamic, and a new or second language is not a 'menace' to the child's identity, so adaptation is rather easy. Compared to older L2 learners, young children are not afraid of making mistakes. Their main concern is whether their attempt to communicate is successful. Older children or adult L2 learners tend to be more protective and defensive of their identity as a capable language user. In using the 'not so fluent' second language, they find that their language ego is threatened and their self-identity is in danger. This salient protection of one's ego more or less contributes to the low achievement in one's L2 acquisition (Brown, 2014).

4. Methodology

Reflexivity or reflective research was the major qualitative method that the researcher of this study applied. Through reflection, a researcher interprets his own suppositions (and practices), by examining others' perspectives with own perspectives, and by placing own assumptions under criticism (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017).

While reflection or "reflexivity talk" may be regarded as a self-indulgent and narcissistic process, Steier (1995, p. 163) as cited in Motari (2015) stated that "reflection is 'a turning back onto a self' where the inquirer is at once an observed and an active observer." Mortari (2015, para 1) further explained that "Reflection aims at understanding the forms of intelligibility by which the world is made meaningful; in the heuristic context of the research work, reflecting means to elucidate the epistemic acts developed in the midst of inquiry process."

In this study, the research target, Tony, and his mother, were engaged to assist in the research. Tony's mother reflected in great detail on the past years when Tony "struggled" to acquire the knowledge of English while immersed in the Chinese language environment since his birth. Tony's mother as a family member to the sample has ample opportunities to observe Tony's English learning process closely pertaining to the materials used, family support and acquisition strategies. The whole description of the learning journey was given from the perspective of an "observer" but not an education provider or a parent to the case.

This research was not intended right from the birth of Tony. In fact, it was initiated only recently. Therefore, searching for the traces of learning from more than a decade ago became a great challenge. There was no representation of audio-visual recordings that can be used for language level analysis. What Tony's mother could find was the written pieces done from 2011 onwards. The period between the birth and before primary schooling was recounted in reference to memory and diary records.

The written works by Tony were used as the data to illustrate the progress of Tony in his English learning after kindergarten. In order to present the changes in Tony's English proficiency, the researcher has employed "Text Inspector©" (textinspector.com) which is a web tool for analysing texts. This professional web tool measures the vocabulary and discourse difficulty level of any text in English. Text Inspector is widely used by major publishers and universities and colleges in over 100 countries including Cambridge University.

When a text is entered, Text Inspector calculates a variety of metrics comprising statistics, readability, lexical diversity, lexical sophistication and metadiscourse. A scorecard is then instantly generated in terms of the level of

CEFR, currently the most widely used reference point for language levels. The score gives a clear idea of what level the text is at.

The descriptions of the sample's learning process, learning tools and materials, environment, interactive partners, and the analysis of his English proficiency were the solid foundations for the later discussion and conclusion for this particular case.

Table 1: The CEFR scales

Level Group Name	Level	Level Name
Basic User	A1	Breakthrough
	A2	Way stage
Independent User	B1	Threshold
	B2	Vantage
Proficient User	C1	Effective Operational Proficiency
	C2	Mastery

Source: Using the CEFR (2011, p.4)

5. Learning Journey

Tony is a Chinese high school student. He lives in Johor Bahru in West Malaysia with his parents. Chinese language is his mother tongue as both his parents are Chinese educated. Mandarin is the major language that Tony uses to communicate at home with parents and relatives as well as at school with his friends and teachers. Tony was educated in a Chinese vernacular primary school and now at a Chinese independent school. During his over ten-year education, all the subjects have been taught in Chinese except the English Language and the Malay Language.

To measure Tony's proficiency in English as a junior middle three student, in 2019, the researcher, also a certified IELTS trainer, made use of the actual IELTS past year paper, Test 5, compiled in Cambridge IELTS 12 Academic Student's Book with Answers (2017, pp. 10-29). As a result, Tony achieved the CEFR Level C2 and can be rated as an English proficient user. According to Tony's mother, he had no problem in understanding English movies without subtitles and was able to read unabridged classic novels such as 1984 by George Orwell.

5.1 1st month to three years old

Tony was born in a family where both parents worked long hours, so he was mainly taken care of by his grandmother in the earliest three years. His grandmother is an ordinary Malaysian Chinese woman who has only primary education and speaks only Mandarin and a few dialects like Cantonese and Hakka.

During his first year after birth, Tony was given English audio stimuli for about an hour every day. Every morning, his grandmother would play a CD with a collection of short tales, speeches, poems and wise sayings from the classics or notabilities. All these great pieces in a series entitled "The English Reciting Program" were narrated by an American native speaker in a very clear and gentle voice (Kuo, 1999). Tony was found influenced significantly by the native speaker's accent when he started to speak in Mandarin with a "foreign" accent at around 12 to 14 months old. The primary feature of this "English-like Chinese" accent is that the speaker tends to use the "first tone" frequently or apply "incorrect tones" for Chinese characters.

This phenomenon faded away when Tony spoke more Mandarin after a couple of months.

A child's language development may be affected by sensitive periods of brain maturation (Blakemore & Frith, 2005). Otto (2017, p. 94) stated that "for phonological knowledge, the time from birth up to about age 10 is the optimum time for development". She also pointed out that the perception of speech sounds is the earliest linguistic capacity starting from the late prenatal period throughout infancy. Similarly, with strong statistical support, the researchers from the University of Kansas found babies capable of discriminating two different languages before birth (in-utero language discrimination) (Minai et al., 2017).

Tony's active absorption of the English sounds proves that infants are well ready to take in the sounds of the language around them and are greatly influenced by the sounds' phonological features such as tones. Therefore, early exposure to the English language is an ideal way to get infants familiar with the target language's rhythmic properties of language.

Before three years old, Tony's mother usually came back to grandmother's house thrice a week. His mother always read to him as much as possible. Tony had not the ability to speak by 1 year old, but he seemed joyful

while his mother was holding a big book in full colours with words. He would stare at the words and pictures which his mother was pointing to while reading along. The books used for reading were not necessary books with big words. Sometimes, they were children's encyclopaedias with plenty of words on a page. There were also hard board books in the playroom and posters on the walls. Tony's mother would read, explain, or ask him to point out the letters or words being read. Right after his 2-year-old birthday, Tony was able to identify and read all 26 letters in the English alphabet.

Ample research confirms that reading to children at young ages brings great benefits. If children are read to more often at an early age, they possess larger vocabularies and more advanced comprehension skills than their counterparts when they start schooling (Mol & Bus, 2011). Obviously, through shared reading, children are exposed to enriched language, which fosters a variety of skills including listening, spelling, reading comprehension, vocabulary and forms of the language. Furthermore, reading to children also encourages them to read books themselves and further enhance their cognitive skills (Kalb & van Ours, 2013).

Around 2.5 years old, Tony started to read Key to Reading series, a set of ten graded readers published by UK Popular. This series creates two young characters, Sam and Anna, to bring the readers into the theme of each book (e.g. I go to school). Children learn a number of key words from each title. As the series progresses, selected key words increase in number and level of difficulty. The writing of each story ensures each key word is repeated 9 to 10 times. After reading the ten books, a child is expected to master 400 most commonly used words in English and be able to read and make sense of most of what he or she reads (Gradding, n.d.).

Tony's mother engaged herself in Tony's reading by reading the books to him and encouraged him to read them on his own. Questions related to the books might be asked but answers were not usually intended. Tony did not depend too much on his mother's explanation for comprehension on the storyline. The pictures, repeated words and familiar events helped him understand the relationship between the symbols (words) and scenario. He could easily figure out the content of the reading materials, showing the capacity of an able independent reader. Later, more children's books were given, and it seemed that Tony had no special difficulty in understanding them as he actually seldom sought help from his parents while reading.

Albay (2017, p. 177) concluded the benefits of graded reading, after a substantial review of extensive literature, that "graded readers motivate learners, help them gain reading fluency, enhance their vocabulary and grammar knowledge development".

During Tony's pre-school years, he also liked to watch cartoons in English such as Disney's Magic English, Dora the Explorer, Thomas and Friends, etc. He would imitate the expressions used in the animation and use them in the daily life. For example, one day, Tony uttered out the word "attack" which was apparently retrieved from Disney's Magic English. Krishnan & Yunus (2018, p. 22) cited David Nunan (1999)'s findings about the effects of cartoon on L2 learners that "being exposed to genuine language material has a vital role in motivating language learners to correlate the content and subject matters to their life". Sajana (2018, p. 2435) also advocated that cartoons should be incorporated in both teaching and learning as "cartoons can attract the attention and interest and it motivates the learners to learn".

Regardless of the learning setting and the age, the availability of cartoons in an ESL learner's environment is essential as cartoon is a medium of exposing the young learner to native speakers' "authentic" English and a motivator to propel the learning process, both of which are much desired in the Malaysian context where English is mostly not "native" or "heard" in a child's immediate environment.

5.2 Nursery & kindergarten

Tony went to kindergarten when he was four years old. The kindergarten was a privately-owned kindergarten in a small residential community. It claimed to use English as the medium of instruction. However, the English standard projected by the kindergarten was in doubt as a couple of mistakes could be found in the photo captions in their student's progress booklet. For example, "Guess! What we plant today?", "Am I look like clown now?" ... etc.

In fact, in Malaysia, it is a common concern about the lack of qualified teachers in the English language teaching scenario. To fix this issue, in 2010, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia announced a new language education policy "To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to Strengthen the English Language". One of the strategies to ensure the success of the policy was to improve the quality of English language teachers (Kepol, 2017). Kepol (2017) pointed out that many English language teachers in the Malaysian education system do not hold an English teaching related qualification. They are assigned to teach English simply due to the shortage of qualified English teachers. Though Tony might not be educated in the native-like and conventional English environment at kindergarten, he had been exposed to spoken English and had plenty of opportunities to express himself. According to a teacher of his, he was given the chance to speak in front of the class very often. Once, on the way back home from kindergarten, Tony told his mother the procedure of making eco-enzyme he had learned from the class that day.

Impressively, he could use his own words to narrate the necessary steps with the correct terms and connectives with great fluency.

Plenty of research shows that putting L2 learners in the English environment can ensure a better acquisition of the English language (Collentine & Freed, 2004; Håkansson & Norrby, 2010). Dong, Hu, Wu, Zheng & Peng (2018) have found from their 10-month longitudinal study that the English-English group had the higher correlation indicator in vocabulary size and reading comprehension than the English-Chinese group or the English-Chinese-English group, proving that the English-only learning environment enhances SLA more than the mixed language settings.

Undoubtedly, a second language learner can apply his knowledge of the target language practically when he is “forced” to listen and speak as he is immersed in the setting that the English language is used as the only medium of instruction and every learner is expected to use English for communication.

5.3 Primary education

At 7 years old, Tony started his primary education at a Chinese vernacular school, also known as National-type Chinese School or Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina). The medium of instruction is Mandarin for all subjects except Malay and English which are also compulsory subjects in the six-year primary education. Tony’s mother pointed out that he could always complete a UPSR (Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah or Primary School Achievement Test) mock paper (English language) with a score of over 80 (Grade A). UPSR is an important national examination taken by all Year 6 students in Malaysia studying at national primary schools. Being a seven-year-old student, apparently, Tony’s proficiency in English did not come from formal education.

To examine Tony’s progression during primary school, four pieces of his writing and one done at 13 years old were collected, selected, and analysed in the later paragraphs. According to the text analysis web tool Textinspector@, only a text of 100 words or over is qualified for a reliable scorecard result. Therefore, to fulfil such a requirement, the researcher purposely selected texts or excerpts within the range of 100 to 150 words to reduce the text size negative effect so that the accuracy and reliability of measurement could be observed.

Among a number of metrics, lexical diversity, readability and metadiscourse were highlighted in particular for their significance in indicating the sample’s progression in mastering English.

Lexical diversity (LD) refers to “the range of different words used in a text, with a greater range indicating a higher diversity” (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010, p.381). As learners progress into their adulthood, there are significant differences in lexical diversity. A useful scale has been offered by Durán, Malvern, Richards and Chipere (2004, p. 238), based on which Table 2 is created to illustrate rough ranges of lexical diversity of various cohorts. According to the scale, writing by an adult L2 learner would generally have a D measure of about 40 to 70, whereas writing by a native speaker would mostly have a measure of 80 to 105.

The Measure of Textual Lexical Diversity (MTLD; McCarthy, 2005) has been employed in this study which is considered a more reliable and consistent tool for its sequential manner to analyse an LD score (Fergadiotis et al., 2013).

Table 2: The lexical diversity scales

Cohort		Lexical Diversity (LD)
Academic Text		80-105
Adult ESL (L2)		40-70
Bristol Cohort (native)	60 months	55-78
	42 months	37-70
	36 months	30-68
	24 months	0-55
	18 months	0-30

On the other hand, “Readability” is measured by Flesch Kincaid Grade, which tells the level of a reader’s education needed to easily read a piece of text in reference to “grades” in accordance to the US grade level of education. For example, if a piece of text has a grade level readability score of 6, this indicates that the text can only be easily read by the average readers having a grade 6 level of reading. The readability test is determined by two factors: sentence length (average number of words in a sentence) and word length (average number of syllabus in a word) (Flesch-Kincaid Readability and EFL, n.d.).

Metadiscourse markers (such as “in addition” and “almost”) are words or phrases that connect the writer to the reader. These markers help the reader organize, interpret, and evaluate information in a text (Sanford, 2012, p. 2). Text Inspector analyses thirteen categories of metadiscourse marker including logical connectives (e.g. finally), emphatics (e.g. in fact), code glosses (e.g. namely), hedges (e.g. mainly) and so on, presenting the results in percentage and the CEFR level. A good use of metadiscourse markers shows the writer’s ability in organizing a text that can be followed by the reader easily.

5.3.1 Writing data: lower primary (7 – 9 years old)

Initially, Tony wrote a story or narrative based on a set of three pictures with 3 to 5 guiding words on each picture. He progressed continuously from writing a short text of around 100 words in Year 1, 150 words in Year 2 to around 200 words in Year 3.

Year 1 (12 June 2011) (102 words) (original length: 102 words)

This is Jit Xiang. He had a very, very poor family but he wanted to be a doctor. But because of his poor family, his parents could not buy any medical books for him. But he really wanted to be a doctor. So, let’s see how does he do now. He studied and studied for days and days and days. At last he won the scholarship. He goes to a medical school to study medicine and body systems. After about eight years, he became a doctor. He finally succeed in his hard work. He lived hapily with his family in Bandar Kaya.

Table 3. Lexical profile of Year 1 sample writing

Overall Score (CEFR Level)	B1
Number of Metrics used	18
Word(s) of Highest level (CEFR Level)	scholarship (C1)
Readability: Flesch-Kincaid Grade (CEFR Level)	4.44 (B1+)
Lexical Diversity (MTLD)	36.66
Metadiscourse (% in the text) (CEFR Level)	13.73 (C1+)
Lexical error(s)	2 *succeed; hapily correction: succeed; happily

Note: Tokens are the total number of words in a text regardless of how often they are repeated (Durán et al., 2004).

At 7 years old, Tony could write a narration of about 100 words, but tended to make errors in spelling (*succeed; *hapily) and word order (*So, let’s see how does he do now.), and did not pay too much attention to the time frame (*He goes to a medical school...). In terms of lexical diversity, he reached the level of an average British 3-year-old kid. He could correctly use a complex expression like the two-word preposition “because of” and construct a lengthy sentence of 16 words. The sentences and phrases in the writing are smoothly connected with sufficient metadiscourse markers whereby he scored C1+ though a number of repetitions are spotted.

Year 3 (8 June 2013) (143 words) (original length: 206 words)

There is a river near the big school of SJK(C) Teck Guang. There is a scout group there. Today, in the afternoon, they are setting a very big raft. The raft is made of wood and some string. There is also a broom stick that is going to be used like a pole. The pole (broom stick) is for guiding the raft, or the raft will just simply go with the flow of the water. The scouts are all very excited when the raft can really float. Then, the teacher/leader of the scouts, who is about 50kg, steps on the big raft, which was floating on the calm water of the river. After that, the big raft still floats. Then, they all put on their life jackets and one by one steps on the big raft. Then, the very big raft still floats.

Table 4: Lexical profile of Year 3 sample writing

Overall Score (CEFR Level)	B2
Number of Metrics used	16
Word(s) of Highest level (CEFR Level)	pole (C2)
Readability: Flesch-Kincaid Grade (CEFR Level)	3.36 (A1)
Lexical Diversity (MTLD)	35.50
Metadiscourse (% in the text) (CEFR Level)	13.89 (C1+)
Lexical error(s)	0

Tony had a better command in writing more complicated sentences. In the longest sentence (25 words) of the text (*Then, the teacher/leader of the scouts, who is about 50kg, steps on the big raft, which was floating on the calm water of the river.*), he used a number of syntactic skills: sequencing marker (*Then*), adjectival clause (*who is..; which was...*),

punctuation marks (a couple of commas) and prepositional phrase (*on the calm water...*). He also had no problem in using the passive voice to talk about the future plan (*...that is going to be used like a pole*). Improvement in observing the time frame is seen. In terms of lexical diversity, he scored slightly below 40 because of the necessary repetition of the key word 'raft' throughout the text. The skill in the application of metadiscourse markers stays high (C1+).

5.3.2 Writing data: upper primary (10 -12 years old)

Starting from 10 years old, Tony was given a composition guide book (Menon 2010) which mainly contained around 150 samples on narrative writings with simple notes, vocabulary or outlines given. Once or twice a week, Tony was asked to read a sample writing from the book and work on his own version with the same topic with the book facing down. He then was able to come out with a story of the similar plot himself. These "imitative" compositions demonstrated his improvement in applying more sophisticated grammar, advanced vocabulary and native-like expressions than the works in the previous years.

"Imitation" might give people an impression of "copying", but to a young writer, seemingly, it is a necessary learning tactic, as what (Gorrell, 1987, p. 58) described in the following the benefits of "imitation":

Imitation allows inexperienced writers to learn from those who are more experienced, frees them from the inhibiting anxiety of striving for correct form and appropriate style, and functions as the vehicle for generating new thoughts. By enabling students to write in conventional and appropriate ways, imitation permits access to the community of writers.

The following are two extracts from Tony's writings during his upper primary education.

Year 4 (22/6/2014) (116 words) (original length: 293 words)

Little that they knew this place was not for a picnic anymore. The parking spaces under the hot sun were all empty, except for the one Sam's car had parked in. It was extremely quiet. When they neared the waterfall, a strong smell of rubbish greeted them.

What they saw next horrified them. The waterfall they once swam in looked like a rubbish dump! Instead of clean, blue water with fish swimming in it, murky brown water gushed down the rocks, sending dead fish flying off the steep cliff. Polystrene boxes, plastic bottles and many kinds of rubbish floated in the sandy water. The small hut was scribbled with "(name) came here once" in every corner. (Imitation source: Menon, 2010, p. 126)

Table 5: Lexical profile of Year 4 sample writing

Overall Score (CEFR Level)	C1
Number of Metrics used	16
Word(s) of Highest level (CEFR Level)	horrified (C2)
Readability: Flesch-Kincaid Grade (CEFR Level)	6.15 (B1+)
Lexical Diversity (MTLD)	103.72
Metadiscourse (% in the text) (CEFR Level)	10 (C2)
Lexical error(s)	1 *polystrene correction: polystyrene)

In reference to well-written samples, Tony set sail to write narratives showing much better command of the English language. His work presents graphic description with sophisticated lexical terms such as "strong smell... greeted them", "gushed down", etc. More advanced grammar structures are also illustrated, for example, using the past perfect in a relative clause to give further information in "...except for the one Sam's car had parked in", though errors can still be found in a more complex structure such as the "inversion" (**Little that they knew this place was not for a picnic anymore*). Noticeably, there is a significant bounce in the lexical diversity category where Tony went beyond the "adult ESL" level and achieved the "academic text" level with a score of over 100. Metadiscourse markers are used in a more natural way.

Year 6 (20/5/2016) (133 words) (original length: 204 words)

Zhiwei, a popular boy was trying to talk Danny into smoking. At first, Danny protested rigorously but now he was a little unsure whether to take the puff.

Danny of course knew the harms of smoking. Harmful tobacco and all that bad stuff. However, Danny also half-wanted to take the cigarette. Zhiwei was looked upon as brave and daring while he was often overlooked. Sometimes, Danny was also called 'cowardly'. He wanted so badly to be accepted as one of the boys. So, Danny slowly reached out for the cigarette.

Zhiwei and the other onlooking boys laughed as Danny spluttered and coughed after the first puff. Danny tried to return the cigarette but Zhiwei laughingly rejected it. He reassured that the next puff would be better. Half-believing in Zhiwei, Danny took another puff. (Imitation source: Menon, 2010, p. 95)

Table 6: Lexical profile of Year 6 writing

Overall Score (CEFR Level)	C1
Number of Metrics used	30
Word(s) of Highest level (CEFR Level)	rigorously (C2)
Readability: Flesch-Kincaid Grade (CEFR Level)	6.47 (B1+)
Lexical Diversity (MTLD)	59.50
Metadiscourse (% in the text) (CEFR Level)	15.91 (C1)
Lexical error(s)	0

Tony managed to maintain his writing level at C1 in his last year at primary school. Compared with the year four analysis above, there is a slight drop in lexical diversity and metadiscourse, probably because the topic requires more repetition of certain words, such as “smoking”. The readability goes higher at 6.55, illustrating that he had the similar writing level of his grade 6 counterparts in America. Various modifiers such as “laughingly”, “rigorously” and “onlooking” are seen and used appropriately without errors. The “erroneous” sentence (Harmful tobacco and all that bad stuff.) is not necessary a true mistake. Instead, it could be a purposeful fragment (a creative writing technique) as it is understandable, fits well in the story plot and gives a strong impact on the reading experience (Neuman, n.d.). Thus, Tony may have jumped out of the “prescriptive grammar” frame and tried something beyond the conventions of the English language.

5.3.3 Summative writing

Tony created this writing about a car crash all by himself without referring to any model text. Two paragraphs are hereby extracted to check its level as a conclusive demonstration of his use of the target language.

Year 7 (1 April 2017) (107 words) (original length: 311 words)

Only a few minutes later, Charles’ car was speeding down the highway at 120 kilometres per hour. The Civic bumped against the guardrails violently a few times, but not quite hard enough to wake Charles from his drunken stupor. However, it did cause enough force to make something happen to Charles’ car.

The force had bent the rim of the front right wheel. Even worse, the right fender was interfering with it. After a few seconds, the entire wheel imploded, while the rest of the car still continued sliding at over a hundred kilometers an hour. Suddenly, the front left axle bent, and all hell broke loose.

Table 7: Lexical profile of Year 7 writing

Overall Score (CEFR Level)	C1+
Number of Metrics used	26
Word(s) of Highest level (CEFR Level)	imploded (C2)
Readability: Flesch-Kincaid Grade (CEFR Level)	7.48 (B1+)
Lexical Diversity (MTLD)	117.68
Metadiscourse (% in the text) (CEFR Level)	14.02 (C1+)
Lexical error(s)	0

Tony seemed to have integrated the techniques of narrative writing into his own writing after three years of taking reference of model writing. His own work at 13 years old presents smoothness and naturalness. The lexical appropriateness (e.g. *drunken stupor*, *wheel imploded*) gives readers a vivid picture of the incident. Syntactic structures wise, he is able to use the C1 level of structure, for example, using a degree adverb to modify a range of adverb types in “... but not quite hard enough to wake Charles from his drunken stupor”. Avoiding repetition or raising diversity seemingly has become Tony’s strength which can be seen in his high score (117.68) in this category. The use of metadiscourse markers remains sophisticated at a score of C1+.

6. Discussion

For easy reference, a summary of the analysis above is presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Summary of Tony’s progression in ESL learning in various categories

	Year (Tony's age)	Overall CEFR	Readability (Flesch- Kincaid Grade)/age appropriate	Lexical Diversity (MTLD)	Metadiscours e Markers
Lower primary	1 (7)	B1+	4.46/age: 9-10	36.66	C1
	3 (9)	B2	3.36/age: 8-9	35.50	C1+
	Mean		3.91/age:8-9	36.08	
Upper primary	4 (10)	C1	6.15/age: 11-12	103.72	C1+
	6 (12)	C1	6.55/age: 11-12	59.50	C1
	Mean		6.35/age: 11-12	81.61	
Secondary 1 (summative)	7(13)	C1+	7.48: age: 12-13	117.68	C1+

According to the analysis on the writings by Textinspector.com, it is clear that Tony progressed consistently in his English language learning throughout the 6-year period of schooling, from an average of slightly below US Grade Level 4 in the first three years to an average of Grade Level 6 in his upper primary. His proficiency climbed steadily from Level B1+ in Year 1 to C1 in Year 6 from the perspective of CEFR. Noticeably, there is a significant jump in readability from a mean of Grade 3.91 for lower primary years to Grade 6.15 in Year 4. The sudden bounce could be due to Tony's being exposed to good writing samples and engaged in the imitative process. The sample writings, the level of which was slightly higher than that of Tony's, act as excellent input for him to pick up a number of expressions and clichés, simple but natural, frequently used by L1 speakers. The findings find clear support for the Input Hypothesis by (Krashen, 2003) who claimed that language acquisition depends solely on comprehensive input (via reading or writing) that is "a bit beyond" the learner's current level of competence. This view is similar to L. S. Vygotsky's (1978) well-known "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). The term "proximal" refers to those skills that the learner is "close" to mastering, and with appropriate educational support, the learner is able to progress into a higher level.

The writing produced in Secondary 1 illustrates Tony's competence in managing a long narrative, showcasing an almost seamless integration of logical organisation, accurate syntactical structures and sophisticated vocabulary, after a few years' 'imitation' training. Geist (2005) assured that imitation is an effective tool for ESL learning and teaching of writing, alongside modern pedagogical principles that promote motivation, self-directedness and creativity.

Tony's writing at 13 years old scoring 7.48 in readability shows that his English proficiency was equivalent to a Grade 7 American native student. This indicates that it is possible to nurture an L2 learner to become a skilful writer in a second language environment on a par with an average English native speaker.

Another important finding lies in Tony's early acquired abilities in constructing grammatically correct sentences and applying appropriate metadiscourse markers. It is a fact that grammatical mistakes are consistently rare in Tony's writing. The steady high score (CEFR C1 or above) in the use of metadiscourse markers since very young illustrates his competency in liaising with readers by smooth conveyance of ideas. Such situations could be traced back to his work at 7 years old or even earlier. It is obvious that he acquires the English syntactic structures fairly early and has no problems in putting words in the correct order and using appropriate word forms and connectors. Apparently, these 'hard-earned' skills to other ESL learners have been acquired by Tony without explicit efforts. Once, he told the researcher that he usually answered school's grammar test questions solely by "feeling" or "instinct reaction" without much referring to the grammar rules which were often emphasised in class. Otto (2017, p. 94) stated that "syntactic and morphemic knowledge appears to have a sensitive period from birth up to puberty (age 12 to 14)". Byrnes & Wasik (2009, p. 132) pointed out that "grammatical skills usually begin to appear after children have 400 words in their vocabularies". Tony's early acquisition of the English structures and accuracy of using words is probably related to his rigorous reading habit whereby he got to understand the first 400 words around 3 years old. The excellent family literacy environment too has boosted him to be exposed to and use English more frequently.

7. Conclusion

Tony's successful learning experience showcases a few things that could be considered to enhance a child's ESL learning outcomes.

First, early exposure to the English language enables the learner to get familiar with and to use English without conscious learning. Besides gaining sufficient vocabularies for communication, the sample shows an excellent

command of English grammar or structures that he seldom makes ESL learners' common errors such as using two main verbs in a simple sentence (*They are go to school.). His early command of basic English also contributes to his willingness to engage himself in English-based activities; for instance, he was able to engage in learning new skills from English manuals like Lego® Mindstorms® robotics at 10 years old. The language proficiency and subject knowledge, in fact, are in a reciprocal relationship in enhancing and speeding up a child's learning process.

Second, family literacy plays a huge role for a child's language learning (Wasik & Van Horn, 2015). Tony apparently has benefitted greatly from the environment where reading and writing have been brought into his daily living space since infancy and subsequently become part of his habit and routine. This finding is much in line with the study conducted by the National Center for Education Statics (USA) (cited in van Pelt, 2018, para. 1) that children with a "richer home literacy environment displayed higher levels of reading knowledge and skills than did their counterparts with less rich home literacy environments." These language skills include concepts of print, knowledge of letters, phonemic awareness, which are highly essential for later reading. Thus parents play an important role in being "mediators of learning" (Cole, 1990) and creating a rich family literacy environment where it helps children immerse in the positive learning setting and builds up a concrete foundation.

Third, imitation from others' works are not a barrier to productive skills but a facility that enhances the learner's capacity in writing by providing necessary forms, vocabularies and formats in diverse genres. With the higher level of lexis, more complicated structures and more natural way of expressing found in the sample writing, a learner has the opportunity to try out a level higher than his or her current competence, without groping in the dark. This helps speed up the learning process of an ESL learner.

In reference the results of the study, the effective learning procedure for a child L2 learner could be suggested as in Table 9.

Table 9: Proposed L2 learning route for children

Age	Strategies	Benefits (Children will...)
0-12 months	English audio stimuli by English native speakers	get familiar with rhythmic properties of English
12-36 months	reading with a parent/caregiver as a mediator of learning	be motivated to read; sharpen listening skills; gain more vocabulary and comprehension skills.
3 -6 years old	reading graded readers alone or with a parent/caregiver	be motivated to read extensively; gain reading fluency; enhance their vocabulary and grammar knowledge development.
	watching (educational) cartoons/animations in standard English	be exposed to genuine language material in real life; be attracted to and interested in the target language; be exposed to authentic English.
Schooling (5 years old and above)	learning in an environment where medium of instruction is English Note: Continue to create an English environment with rich family literacy at home if going to an English-medium school is impossible.	be immersed in the L2 environment and use English for communication as a habit.
	Imitating well-written writing by L1 authors	be exposed to higher level writing skills; be able to speed up their process of learning by removing the stage of "groping in the dark".

Every study has its limitation. It is believed that the description and indications of the findings from this case study could direct parents of non-English native speakers to the right direction in nurturing a child into a high proficient English user. However, this research does not provide specific suggestions on how rich the family literacy should be for a pre-schooling child, or to what extent the environment affects a child's English learning in the Malaysian community. Other than early exposure to the target language, there are other factors that may

contribute to the effectiveness of Tony's English learning too: viewing Youtube videos, gaming online with English native speakers, receiving traditional classroom instruction, and so on. These are not included or considered in this study due to a lack of evidence.

Undeniably, a case study cannot represent all children in the adopted setting, and learning a language is far too complex a process to be elaborated on only through a few strategies or factors. Nonetheless, future studies could fruitfully explore this issue further by looking into successful ESL learners with parents illiterate or less proficient in English, and suggest kinds of support that could be provided to enrich the literacy environment.

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