English as a Second Language (ESL) Learning: Setting the Right Environment for Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Early exposure to English is very important as it is crucial for learners to acquire English language at early age as English is a global language that is used not only in the level of primary and secondary school but also in tertiary level of education. Schools can be one of the important roles in influencing second language acquisition, particularly English language. However, most schools did not consider acquiring English from the perspective of learners' fluency and rarely consider movements or approaches that they can take to improve ESL learning among students. This study intended to investigate the influence of school settings and routines on ESL learning among secondary students. A qualitative method is used in this study as data were collected through the method of observation and interview. The observation period throughout the process of collecting data has been conducted based on a field note specifically prepared for this study. The participants involved in this study were all-girl school students located in Selangor. The gathered data were then interpreted in the findings analysis. Based on this study, it was proven that there are co-relations between the school settings and routines on ESL learning among secondary students. It was found that school settings and routines do influence ESL learning among secondary students. Discussion and recommendations are further explained in this study. Thus, it is hoped for future researchers to conduct further research on related factors that might help to contribute in ESL learning among ESL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Various factors contribute to the success of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Alves & Oliveira, 2014; Kalati, 2016). The learners' environment and setting have been acknowledged as an important one (Castello, 2015). Schools are the place where English as a Second Language (ESL) learners learn English other than at homes. Acquiring a language is not only understanding the concept or format of that language but being able to speak the language fluently is what makes learners acquire the language (Dong & Ren, 2013). Some understand English and good in writing essays but not in communicating the language itself (Ghezlou & Biria, 2017; Khan & Khan, 2016). Schools play an important role in giving exposure to learners on the importance of English language and how can they acquire the language (Ahmed, 2015; Nguyen & Terry, 2017).

Early exposure to English is very important as it is crucial for learners to acquire English language at early age as English is a global language that is used in basically everything not only in the level of primary and secondary level (Akcay, Butuner, & Arikan, 2015). In

Malaysia, English is accepted as the second language and is widely used as a medium of instruction in both formal and informal settings. English is even used in tertiary level of education where every lectures, journals, and books are all in English. According to the Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, it is a priority to the government in getting Malaysians to master English language as the language played an important role in nation building (Shah, Othman, & Senom, 2017; Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Environment and setting could be one of the best factors influencing ESL learning among secondary students. School can be one of the important roles in influencing ESL learning (Akcay et al., 2015). This statement indicates a crucial problem that a lot of students face in learning and particularly communicating the second or foreign language, specifically English language, in this case, many secondary learners express their problems related to that and sometimes even acknowledge their inability in learning to speak English (Akcay et al., 2015).

It is only natural for students to encounter problems in learning. The dynamic of learning process could promote confusion and problems that could hinder the process of language acquisition. Students' difficulties found because of ineffective input and output, having no real need for interaction, attaching too much importance to language forms and written tests. Some learners also lack the motivation to speak English. They do not see a real need to learn or speak English (Al Hosni, 2014).

Some problems emerged in the students' daily interaction as stated above. The needs to interact in English need to be fostered by raising the students' awareness and understanding of why English should be mastered by them. The students' motivation should be paid a considerable attention since motivation is actually the driving force for the students to move further. For overcoming these previous problems can be done by involving learners in performing two types of communicative tasks: focused, communicative tasks and unfocused communicative tasks (Ellis, 2003). Both of these tasks seek to engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than displaying language. They seek to develop language proficiency through communication (Ellis, 2003).

School setting in this study plays an important role as a catalyst to help ESL learners in the process of ESL learning. School is the place where ESL learners learn how to interact with peers, teachers, and staffs at school. Providing good school setting and environment will be a good medium in improving ESL learners' language acquisition. Researches Firth and Wagner mentioned that the interaction of social activity of learners with peers and environment is considered as the best method of Second Language Acquisition (Wagner, Altherr, Eckert, & Jodl, 2007). Learning environment in Hidden Curriculum 2014 is referred as the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn, such as outside-of-school locations and outdoor environments.

As mentioned in a paper done by Jantmary Thirusanku and Melor Md Yunus (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014), they quoted on Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's claim regarding the first wave of the Malaysian Education Blueprint Plan 2013-2025 on an amount of 6100 English Language teachers from primary and secondary schools were retrained nationwide to be more skilful in English language (Blueprint, 2015). The Malaysian Education Blueprint emphasizes the importance of this language in schools and introduces many innovative teaching and learning strategies to enhance students' English proficiency (Sidhu, Kaur, & Chi, 2018). In The Government committed in promoting the use of English in schools to ensure people, especially students to have

a better command of the language (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014).

There are a lot of factors that might contribute to ESL learning among secondary students. Therefore, this study intends to see in what ways school setting can influence and affect ESL learning among secondary students, especially in Malaysian context. It can further support, or perhaps, disagree with past studies that proves the influence of school setting and routines on second language (L2) learning.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

A simple way to define language learning is the process which the language capability develops in an individual. Learning language per say takes strategies, and according to Wenden and Rubin, learning strategies can be defined as actions, steps, plans or routines taken by the learners in processing the information they received (Wendel, 2011). Learners learn differently according to their language learning styles and preferences. Language learning cannot take place only in the brains of individual learners alone but are instead related to social factors when learners interact in daily life with other people in their surroundings in order to acquire the language (Dil, Öğretildiği, & Sınıflarında, 2015; Yanti, Cole, & Hermon, 2017). The results of research done by Stella show that the context of metacognitive and social strategies seems to play an important role in the learners' strategy use in the process of acquiring new language (Taquette & Minayo, 2017). This basically means that learning a language does not involve only the understanding of the theory and concept of the language. L2 learners also should be able to apply the language itself in daily life depending on the context and situation in order for the language to be learnt or acquired. Interacting with other people using the language and make use of the language in daily life is the part of the process of language learning. Harwati Hashim et al. also mentioned in a study that language learning process is not limited only within the classroom but also may continue to happen in a conventional setting (Hashim, Yunus, & Embi, 2016). According to Supyan cited by Harwati Hashim et al., ESL students need social support or scaffolding in improving their ESL learning (Hashim et al., 2016).

In today's society, English is very important and is the most common global language that is used for worldwide communication. The real situation that is currently happening in Malaysia is that the English is used only in a limited or confined situations such as during any presentation or written works that has to be done in English, but other times, Bahasa Malaysia is used. Learners are lacking in exposure to the language as there is quite a limited chances to use English outside of the classroom is one of the causes that leads to limited English proficiency among Malaysian learners and students. With all of this being said, it is obvious that learning English language is one of big importance in today's world.

In a study done by Ting et al., it is important to provide an English-speaking environment for Malaysian students' (Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, & Jerome, 2017). Many students are very shy and afraid to speak English with other friends (Cole, Hermon, & Yanti, 2015). This is then later agreed by Ansari and Al Hosni in their study on speaking anxiety in ESL/EFL classrooms which his findings have found out that speaking anxiety is the major cause that leads and contributes to learner's language acquisition (Al Hosni, 2014; Ansari, 2015). One's effort and attempt to use and communicate in English outside the classroom are seen by others as being westernized and having the intention to abandon the use of Malay language, the official language of Malaysia. Students

are also afraid of using broken English which is why schools somehow play an important role in setting the right environment for learners' language acquisition where learners can speak freely and not be afraid for using wrong grammar or feel intimidated by other learners or the situation itself.

However, in regards to a whole school approach to supporting ESL learners, Idrus discusses in her study that there is a gap in current research surrounding the importance of making personal connections to show greater empathy and support to ESL learners (Idrus & Nazri, 2016). Relatedly, we also begin to learn that the whole school approaches to supporting ESL learners have the potential to increase the academic and social success of the students. Idrus mentioned in her study that there has been minimal attention and focus on whole school approaches in helping and supporting ESL learners (Idrus & Nazri, 2016). Thus, she concluded in her study that the findings of her study have shown that it is essential to create inclusive, caring and risk-free school-wide environment for ESL learners to succeed. Saad stated in her finding that it is very crucial to provide good environmental conditions that are able to assist and hamper English language learning (Saad, 2015).

ESL learning cannot be separated by the initial capabilities of the students and how they are able to develop things that they are lack of. The development undergoes by the students could actually be monitored and thus, could be assisted in the specific aspects that need to be improved. One theory that could be used as a basis for such monitoring and assistance is the theory proposed by Vygotsky. The theory is well known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The concept of the zone of proximal development was originally developed by Vygotsky to argue against the use of academic, knowledge-based

tests as a means to gauge students' intelligence. He also created ZPD to further develop Jean Piaget's theory of children being lone learners. The ZPD concept is seen as a scaffolding; a structure of support points for performing an action (Obukhova & Korepanova, 2009). This refers to the help or guidance received from an adult or more competent peer to permit the child to work within the ZPD.

Vygotsky's theory of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) is to say that learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to function and work only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and communicating with his peers is an important feature of learning. Vygotskian paradigms promotes the idea that learning is a social process that occurs when learners interact, with an expert, with each other and with their environment (Srivastava & Joshi, 2014). Srivastava dan Joshi also mentioned in their study on how cognitive process happen to be helpful in the process of learning and mediated by social interaction which results in the occurrence of learning (Srivastava & Joshi, 2014). Through interaction, learners will learn best. Interaction between learners can scaffold and assist in the L2 acquisition language. In this way, social interaction is encouraged to help and improve learning. Vygotsky claims that the secret of effective learning came from the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skills and knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978).

Motivation and attitude are could also be considered an important point in ESL learning. How the students view the language and what kind of motivation drives them could heavily affect its acquisition. It really isn't possible to give a simple definition of motivation, though one can list many characteristics of the motivated individual. For example, the motivated individual is goal directed,

expends effort, is persistent, is attentive, has desires (wants), exhibits positive affect, is aroused, has expectancies, demonstrates self-confidence (self-efficacy), and has reasons (motives) (Kieinginna & Kleinginna, 1981). The motivation to learn and acquire a second language is considered in the socio-educational model of second language acquisition (Gardner, 1985). Gardner's theory also argues that a positive attitude towards the second language community is required in order to enhance the level of motivation to learn a second language and a desire to become a part of that community is also equally important.

METHOD

A school located in Petaling Jaya had been chosen to be the participant for this study due to its location which situated exactly at the center of the city. This study involved the whole school. The particular school chosen is an all-girls school located in Petaling Jaya. The school consists of mix race students and the participants in this study were all selected randomly while the observation was conducted. The school had been chosen due to its location and also due to its history in a previous study by Rosli Talif and Malachi Edwin that has been stated as one of the best urban area schools in Malaysia that shows a very significant proofs of having mostly proficient students in English language (Talif & Edwin, 2001).

A qualitative research strategy is conducted which observation method was selected as an instrument to collect the data. Observations were conducted in that particular school to observe the level of proficiency among secondary students. Other than that, the most important part in the observations conducted was the school's settings and routines that have been proven as one of the mediums in language learning among secondary students in that particular school. Field

notes were also included as the instrument of observation. Field notes were used to record behaviors, activities, events or of setting being observed, in this situation the school setting. Field notes helped in observing a culture, setting or social situation. The elements included in the field notes were as follows:

a. School Setting (includes the environment of the school).
b. School Routines (includes all the programs provided by the school in order to enhance students' English language proficiency).

In order to further support the study and to answer the research question mentioned, a casual but proper interview with one of the students was done in investigating her opinion as student on whether school settings and routines influence their English language learning. The following is the flowchart of this study.
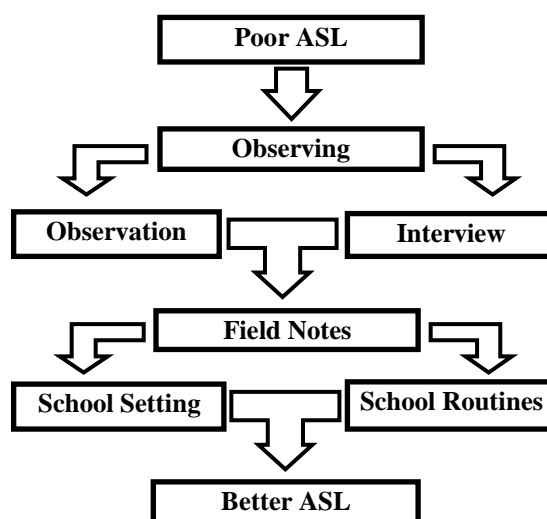

Figure 1. The Flowchart of the Study

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
School Settings

Based from the observation conducted, it can be seen that the school has such a good environment for the students. The place is calming and has all of the facilities that help students to be able to learn perfectly. In terms of acquiring language for secondary students, it can be seen that the school has

the perfect environment for students in acquiring English as their second language. The school is famous for its high proficient students who are fluent in English. Based from the observation conducted, it can be seen that most of the students of the school are all fluent in English language. Most of the students in the school has high self-esteem, and they are very proficient in communicating in English language among themselves and even with other people (teachers, staffs, etc.). One of the reasons is because of the school environment as has been supported and agreed by one of the students. *"Yes!"* quoting the interviewee referring to researcher's question of *'Do you think that school is the main reason of your fluency and proficiency in English language.'* Everyone in that school mostly interact and communicate in English with each other including the teachers and staffs thus making students to feel more comfortable and more motivated to use English in their daily interactions with the society and community. The findings are consistent with the findings from a study paper done by Shobana and Zairus on how social interaction is encouraged to help and improve learning (Srivastava & Joshi, 2014). The findings are also parallel to the literature of Gardner and Lambert's theory on how a positive attitude towards the second language community is required to enhance the level of motivation to learn a second language and a desire to become a part of that community is also equally important. Apart from that, the school has a lot of facilities that help students to be able to improve on their English language. Every corner of the school is occupied and filled with English vocabulary that help students to get used to the words and phrases of English language.

School Routines

It takes practices and efforts in order to acquire language. Every school in the world obviously has taken their efforts and strategies in improving their students' language proficiency in English language. School routines includes all of the activities that has been conducted by the school in making students to get used to English language. In contrary to the research findings from a study done by Idrus that says there is a gap in current research surrounding the importance of making personal connections to show greater empathy and support to ESL learners (Idrus & Nazri, 2016), it is found from the observation conducted that the school of study has done quite a lot of activities that help students in improving their proficiency in English language. These routines and programs are conducted regularly for the benefits of the students. '5-minutes English Reading Routine' is one of the activities conducted at the school. The routine needs students to allocate 5 minutes of their time early in the morning on every Wednesdays to read any English materials before the learning session begins. Apart from that, based on the study, it has also been found that the school has a routine of replacing every Fridays' assembly to a 20 minutes session of reading. Students are asked to read any English material during the assembly time. This kind of routine help students to be able to train themselves to get used to reading and indirectly help expanding their vocabulary in English language. Reading is one of the best methods in acquiring language.

Reading helps in improving students' level of accuracy in the use of English in their life. Students gain a lot through reading and they sometimes acquire language through reading thus maintaining a reading session weekly has been proven to be one of the best methods in helping secondary students in acquiring language. Besides having the reading programs as mentioned above, the school also has a weekly routine of having Public Speaking activity on every Tuesdays during assembly. Two volunteers were chosen every week to perform their public

speaking during the morning assembly. This activity helps students to be able to get themselves used to speak and talk in public in front of the crowd without feeling self-conscious and improving students' self-esteem in using English as part of their daily routine. Feeling shy and scared to talk in public using English language has always been the issue for students when it comes to ESL learning. It can be seen that through the program conducted by the school, majority of the students in that school are not ashamed of talking in public. Most of the students are participative and willing to speak in front of public. This indirectly helps students' level of proficiency by practicing their fluency in speaking English language casually. The findings are to be seen as the strategies of the school in helping the students to be more fluent in English language and to increase their level of proficiency.

On another note, as for the learning session from the observation conducted, English teachers are all encouraged to use the worksheets and handouts in the newspaper 'The Star' to be used in their learning session. The motives of using the materials from the newspaper is for students to be able to relate to real life with all the relatable themes provided in the handouts and not restricting them to only textbooks. The materials from the newspaper are all interactive and interesting thus help gaining students' attention to be more participative in the class during the teaching and learning session. These routines help students to be more confident in themselves in acquiring and using the language at the same time.

These analysis have also included the findings from an interview session with one of the students during the time of observation at the school to investigate the influence of school routines in language learning among secondary students. Based on the interview, the interviewee mentioned that she thinks the

school has helped her a lot in acquiring English language. During the casual interview, she mentioned in her statement:

"I've always been a part of the Literature Concert my school organizes annually each year, and I've participated in a few international English competition such as the Sea Forensics. Thus I could fairly say my fluency in English boost up by involving in various school-based programs and international competition the school participated in."

The findings of the interview have shown that school routines do indirectly help students in boosting up their confidence level and produce sense of belonging within students.

CONCLUSION

School has been proven based on the findings of this present study, as one of the mediums for students to gain experiences in terms of sense-of-belonging and confidence in the process of acquiring ESL. This suggests that students need to believe that they would likely to get sufficient practice for learning English language. This study also believes that based from the findings of this present study, there are co-relations between school settings and routines with students' performance on ESL learning. The intersection point of these two relations would be the motivation of the students as we can always enhance and improves students' willingness to acquire ESL learning through motivations which can always be provided by the school with the help of the teachers and the settings of the school. It has also been proven that school settings and routines help students to have confidence, a sense of belonging and help them to maintain their sense of optimism in their process of ESL learning and acquiring language.

It is believed that the findings of this study can help both future and current

teachers to benefit from this study on gaining general ideas on how to help ESL learners in acquiring L2 outside the classroom by creating the right and suitable environment in helping learners to acquire L2. However, there is no specific measure to what extend do school settings, and routines influence secondary students' learning on ESL as there are other possible factors that might contribute to the matter of acquiring language among secondary students. Thus, it is hoped for future researchers to have further researches on related factors that might help to contribute in ESL learning among ESL learners.

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