

Early Second Language Learning and Arts Integration in Malaysian Multicultural Context: A Sociocultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

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Participating in art activities benefits young children tremendously, especially in promoting young children's language development. In Malaysian education system, English is learned as a compulsory subject in school from kindergarten level and it is a second language (L2) for most of the population. Art activities provide a language and discourse-rich environment for young learners to communicate. Interaction is the foundation of learning a language in the sociocultural learning perspective. The diverse language input during the art activities helps children to understand the abstract language instructions and meaning, hence, yielding language output. By integrating art activities in language classroom, it promotes languages development and enhances the understanding of cultures diversity that is exceptionally vital in Malaysian multicultural of which the understanding among the cultures is introduced at young age. In terms of the significance of cross-disciplinary in learning, this paper discusses the integration of art activities to optimize English as L2 learning experience especially the oral language among the young children in Malaysia through the lens of the sociocultural theory and how it promotes multiculturalism. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed at the end of this paper.

Contribution/Originality: This paper contributes the insights of integrating visual arts in the field of second language learning and how the integration of visual arts benefits the young learners in Malaysian English learning context.

1. Introduction

Unique in her multiculturalism, Malaysia is rich in culture with its three main ethnic groups, namely, Malays, Chinese, and Indians as well as various indigenous tribes who speak their respective native language (L1). Hence, in a school context, classrooms consist students of diverse language and cultural backgrounds. English, as the second

language (L2) to most Malaysians, it is one of the compulsory subjects under Malaysian education curriculum starting from preschool level. Despite more than a decade of exposure and learning English as well as the reformation of English teaching such as the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Malaysian students still lack communication skills especially in speaking due to various factors such as lack of confidence (Abu Bakar et al., 2021). Language learning at preschool-level is fundamental. According to Cameron (2018), the language experiences that young children have in their language classroom are likely to influence the target language development. To provide a holistic learning experience for young children, an integrated approach based on the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (*Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan, KSPK*) – Malaysian preschool curriculum, can be used. It suggests the integration of skills, skills and values, strands, among activities as well as various methods and techniques. English learning, under the communication strands, learners (preschoolers) are to achieve to be communication competent in using the target language, English. Although the KSPK promotes the integration and interactive learning in preschool level and an early learning setting should be interactive, rote learning of English is still taking up most of the routine in Malaysia preschool context (Qin & Nor, 2018) and there is a lack of interaction between teachers and students in the kindergarten setting in Malaysia (Mustafa & Ahmad, 2017). To learn an L2 successfully, meaningful communicative activities is fundamental from the view of the sociocultural theory (SCT). Through the lens of SCT, this paper aims to discuss the integration of arts (under creativity and aesthetics) into the communication strand (languages learning) through the lens of SCT to elevate the English learning experience among Malaysian preschool-aged children while promoting multiculturalism.

2. Literature Review

Through the lens of sociocultural theory (SCT), it suggests that children learn a language through social interaction. In learning an L2, with the use of the target language through interaction, the input and output of the language mediate and lead children to internalize the target language. Therefore, young children should be given ample opportunities to participate in various communicative and interactive activities in the language classroom. Spoken language or oral language plays a significant role as the precursor of young children's later literacy development. Hence, a well foundation of the L2 spoken/oral language is crucial among young learners. When learning an L2 at a young age, children should not be compared to adult-learners due to the characteristics of young children from the linguistic, psychological, and social development (Cameron, 2018). For instance, explicit learning such as abstract linguistic rules does not favor young children's language learning. Also, children generally give less prolonged attention in explicit learning compared to adults. As a result, in providing children an optimal second language learning pedagogy, to understand the learning characteristics of children is essential. Hence, the developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and multimodal learning are discussed before tapping on the benefits of integrating arts in L2 learning in Malaysian multicultural context from the perspective of SCT.

2.1. Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The diversity of language and culture in the classroom should be acknowledged especially in the multiethnic English classroom with diverse English proficiency levels in Malaysian classroom context. To begin with, providing an optimal learning context for children, the implication of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is essential for

learners at an early childhood age (zero to eight years). This includes the language learning domain. According to National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), DAP is defined as the methods that promote children's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, and engaged learning. Therefore, DAP should be considered when designing pedagogy for young learners of the English Language. The essence of DAP according to [Kostelnik, Soderman, and Whiren \(2011\)](#) is:

Weaving the strands of age appropriateness, individual appropriateness, and sociocultural appropriateness into a cohesive philosophy requires deliberate effort and continuous reflection. First, as educators we must recognize the unique ways in which children are children, not miniature adults. (Kostelnik et al., 2011, pp. 22)

As such, in learning an L2 at early childhood age, approaches and supports given to Malaysian children should cater the factors of the diversity of language and cultural backgrounds within the implication of DAP. For instance, children's perspectives towards linguistic and cultural diversity as well as provide supports to encourage children's target language use (English) in the classroom ([Kostelnik et al., 2011](#)).

2.2. Multimodal Learning

From the perspective of the DAP, to lay a sound foundation of L2 in early years, an interactive and discourse-rich classroom is vital in the L2 learning process. It contributes to the appropriateness of developmental pedagogy design to cater the needs of young children learning a L2. Furthermore, in the view of developmental sociolinguistics, to be competence of a language, children need to be able to use the language in socially "appropriate" ways ([DeStefano, 1971](#)). If children are not exposed to social/oral interaction of the language, the development of the language may be restricted to a textbook variety. As such, if Malaysian young children are not exposed to discourse-rich English learning environment, it may hamper the English development in later stages.

Multimodal learning according to [Aden and Theodotou \(2019\)](#) is the process of learning which different ways of communicating and internalizing new knowledge apart from texts are used by learners of which meaning is made in various modes such as through the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on ([Cope & Kalantzis, 2000](#)). It plays a significant role in early learning for children aged 0-8 years old ([Aden & Theodotou, 2019](#)). As such, a multimodality of L2 learning is significant for young L2 learning. Multimodal learning approach provides a more memorable and meaningful learning experience to young children. For instance, the Reggio Emilia approach is immensely relevant to the multimodality in children's learning. It bases its learning philosophy on theory from Vygotsky.

2.3. Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning at young age

From the perspective of sociocultural theory (SCT), [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#), the key person of SCT, argued that young children learn, and their knowledge is constructed through social interaction. SCT has been widely discussed in the field of early childhood learning, educational psychology, as well as adult and child second language learning, to name a few. He believed that learning and development are achieved under the core constructs of SCT such as mediation, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and internalization.

Vygotsky argued that humans' activities are mediated and regulated by tools in the physical world. The tools include physical and symbolic (or psychological) tools which help learners to make meaning of the learning. In terms of meaning making, [Vygotsky \(1987\)](#) pointed the significant role of generalization and its connection in social interaction which eventually connects to the language development of children. From the perspective of Vygotsky, words used in communication should be understood by users to communicate and pass the meaning successfully to another person. The mutual understanding requires generalization. The social experiences will constitute meaning-making in language learning. Hence, in L2 learning, the experiences occurred in children's social interaction help them to develop their meta-language to appropriate the functions of the target language – making meaning of the language.

To support, six principles of children L2 development ([Konishi al et., 2014](#)) show the importance of social interaction in early L2 learning at preschool age. [Table 1](#) shows the significance of active interaction that contains language input and output of the target language through the development of children's L2 as well as the authentic and communicative context that leads the meaning-making progress of children.

Table 1: Six Principles of Second Language Development

Six Principles of Second Language Development	
Principle 1	Children learn what they hear most.
Principle 2	Children learn word for things and events that interest them.
Principle 3	Interactive and responsive rather than passive contexts promote language learning.
Principle 4	Children learn words best in meaningful contexts.
Principle 5	Children need to hear diverse examples of words and language structures.
Principle 6	Vocabulary and grammatical development are reciprocal processes.

Source: [Konishi al et. \(2014\)](#)

As such, the oral interaction (speaking and listening) allows children to practice the words use and other language features of the target language. Also, when children are engaged in the oral interaction, their listening skills could too be enhanced. The oral language competence of the target language plays a vital role ([Greenfader, Brouillette, & Farkas, 2014](#)). Oral language includes speaking and listening. It is the precursor of children's later literacy development. Listening (receptive language skill) allows children to adapt and familiarize the phonological knowledge of the target language then produce it through speech (speaking skill). The phonological awareness of the target language constitutes the development in literacy such as reading and writing (spelling). As a result, to lay a strong foundation of the target language - English among Malaysian children with diverse language backgrounds, the mastery of English oral language is crucial. [Cameron \(2018\)](#) suggests that the language experience that young children get in their L2 learning is vital for their later language development. Due to the multilingual context, the amount of exposure and levels of English language skills vary among Malaysian children. Hence, to lay a strong foundation of the language learned in Malaysian young children to better prepare them in later academic journey, the oral language skill should be well built in the preschool English classroom. For instance, result shown in the study of [Greenfader, Brouillette, and Farkas \(2014\)](#) indicates the important role oral language played in early English learning, hence, activities that enhance oral language skills could be integrated in lessons of different languages to enhance young children's discourse skills of the languages learned in school. The types of discourse or the language used in the language classroom allows children to be prepared

to use the target language for real communication purposes which is not constrained only in the classroom (Cameron, 2018). The activities introduced in the English classroom should be able to help young children to make meaning of the language they are learning. An interactive English learning context is vital for Malaysian students with different language backgrounds as the English classroom could be the primary English interaction context for the use due to the use of native language at home.

2.4. Arts and Early Second Language Learning in SCT

In light of KSPK integration of strands, multimodal learning, and DAP, the integration of art activities into English learning classroom shall not be undermined in the multi-cultural and lingual context like Malaysia. In terms of arts and language, Wink and Putney (2002) in "The Vision of Vygotsky" stated, an "art class is a natural place for those who are acquiring English as an additional language" (Wink & Putney, 2002; pg.51). Arts and language are intertwined. Young children communicate what they know through visual arts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), as cited in Chang and Cress (2013). The diverse language input during the art activities enables young children to understand the functions of language which enhances the communication skills. Art activities are often experienced though oral communication such as instructions giving and ideas sharing. In this context, young children are experiencing an interactive language learning environment that promotes language input - receptive language (listening) and output - expressive language (speaking). Learning a language is to communicate and make meaning of the world through realizing its functions while socializing.

Arts can be defined as visual arts, music, drama, dance, and literature. In the lens of SCT, as part of the cultural tools, arts are one of the mediation tools that mediate human's learning (Lantolf, 2000). Over the decades, studies indicate the upsides of integration of arts in English as an L2 in terms of the development in reading skills, oral language and lower down the affective filter of language acquisition among preschool-aged children (Brouillette et al., 2014; Craig & Paraiso, 2008). The diversity of art activities provides opportunities for children in promoting L2 development and serves as a platform for multimodal learning which is deemed significant in L2 learning. For instance, hands-on activities play a role in developing L2 vocabulary and the learning of words relies on the experiences of the senses, actions, and emotions (Greenfader, Brouillette and Farkas (2014). Therefore, arts, as one the cultural tools, can be used as the mediation tool to regulate young children's oral communication in the target language. Due to the psychological development of children in learning, concrete demonstration and hands-on activities are important as children learn by doing and children's understanding comes from what they see, hear, and interact with. Next, mediation and zone of proximal development (ZPD) will be discussed of how integrating art activities could enhance the learning of English as an L2 among young children.

2.5. Mediation

According to Kozulin (2018), "mediation is provided both by adults who 'interpret' the world to children and by the symbolic tools that, being internalized, become inner psychological tools to regulate the children's mind" (Kozulin, 2018 pp. 28). Unlike older learners who have developed a considerable metalinguistic level which contributes to L2 learning, young learners require mediational tools to make meaning of how the target language functions. When young children are learning a new language, they must be made understand the meaning of the new language. In perspective of SCT, mediation is a

form of regulation. Physical and symbolic tools are used to mediate children's language learning to regulate the use of language. Children require mediation to make sense and connect the language to the environment around them and their everyday life. Arts, as seen as the cultural entities in SCT can be used as the symbolic resources to mediate young children's language learning. Moreover, adults (teacher) involved could act as the mediator during the learning process. In terms of child language learning, children develop the capacity to regulate their activity through language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The art making context provides young children a variety of tasks to mediate then regulate the use L2. The development of self-regulation goes through three stages namely:

- i. Object-regulation: In art making context, art making materials and objects can be used to assist young children's understanding of the language use in L2 learning.
- ii. Other-regulation: In sociocultural theory, this regulation is sometimes described as "scaffolding". It involves varying levels of assistance by adults and peers explicitly and implicitly.
- iii. Self-regulation: It refers the ability to accomplish activities with minimal or no external supports.

The development of self-regulation in language learning means the ability to achieve the mastery of a language. It could be promoted while integrating art activities in English learning classroom. Drawing the significance of social interaction from the perspective of SCT, facilitating meaningful interactive activity is fundamental to the success of L2 learning. The "*social interaction serves as the primary means for mediating learning.*" (Ellis, 2015, pp.215). For instance, during object-regulation stage, young children use the action "dipping the brush into the water" to understand the meaning of "dip" which is rather abstract to understand if no action is performed. At this stage, young children are being regulated by objects. During the stage of other-regulation, the social interaction occurred during art activities in the English lesson allows teachers or peers to correct a child's use of the language and allows them to appropriate the use of the particular language. Lastly, during the stage of self-regulation, it means the ability to master and internalized the target language without much assistance. The ability of self-regulation can be enhanced through the structured or unstructured discussion of artistic topics. It promotes the oral interaction in using English. In order to proceed the stages to achieve internalization, the Zone of Proximal plays a significant role through the lens of SCT.

2.6. Zone of Proximal Development

There are two levels of development in learning, namely, "the actual developmental level, which the learners' actual level, and (2) the level of potential developmental level, which the level of learners could achieve with the assistance of an expert or through the collaboration with peers (novice). The collective activities during children's social interaction leads to the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Integrating art activities into English learning is not teaching children about arts, rather, it creates stages for children to perform their language ability through arts activities like narrating artworks, reciting poems, to name a few. The goal of learning a language is to be competent in communication. Young children learn what they hear most (Konishi et al., 2014), the interactive nature of art activities provides the quality and quantity of language input, and it yields language output. It creates a more authentic and versatile language learning environment that leads social interaction where children could compare their old linguistic knowledge (mistakes) and modify then reproduce new language knowledge (correction). The language knowledge such as phonological skills, pragmatics, syntax,

morphological skills, and vocabulary (semantics). Also, it provides an opportunity for children to appropriate the language function of the target language of which is crucial in communication. The interaction that yields communication between teachers and peers during arts activities creates ZPD.

The collaborative dialogue with teachers during the participation of art activities creates ZPD where explicit or implicit feedback could be provided by the teachers based on the types of activities being incorporated. It allows children to generate new linguistic knowledge or consolidate existing knowledge, modify L2 output in terms of its function and internalize the usage. The use of visuals such as paintings, pictures, and art tools could act as the mediation tools to enhance the effectiveness of ZPD. In this construct, teachers serve as the 'other-regulation' to mediate children's English using and scaffold during the learning support process in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which allows children to advance in their English development. The interaction and communication would proceduralizing language knowledge to reach automaticity – more fluent automatic of L2 production (Gass & Mackey, 2015). The WH- question used during arts activities scaffold and facilitate children's oral language. For instance, study of Khaydarovna (2022) has investigated the importance of using WH-questions in teaching English language to young learners. Furthermore, study of Chang and Cress (2013) showed how children's oral language was facilitated by the used visual arts. The interactive communication was sustained using the child's drawing and the WH-questions were used by the adult in class. The WH- questions furthered the linguistic scaffolding strategy and facilitated the child's oral language skills in listening, meaning-making, and expressing thinking.

Peers' interaction which occurred during collaborative arts activities such as craft-making and group drawing is significant in the emergence of ZPD. Study of Ohta (1995, as cited in Lantoff, 2000) indicates the higher level of language competence result in both L2 learners. In Mitchell and Myles (2004), several types of peer interaction and its benefits in oral L2 production have been discussed through the lens of SCT.

2.7. Arts Integration and Second Language Learning in a Multicultural Context

The benefits of arts activities towards children have long been discussed and studies have shown how it has complemented in L2 learning. Nevertheless, little research has been done in the aspect of the integration of arts in L2 learning, in this case, English, in Malaysia's multicultural context and how it will benefit the multiethnicity in Malaysian. Language, arts, and culture are intertwined. They possess symbolic relation and represent a community. Besides promoting a developmentally appropriate and an optimal L2 learning context for young children, participating in art activities helps bridging the cultural and linguistic divides. In sociolinguistic perspective, culture and language is tightly linked. Arts are the subdivision of culture. It contains ample cultural elements that can be used as the learning aids in a language learning classroom. According to Thirusanku and Yunus (2016), learners showed interest in learning materials that are linked to the local flavors. Hence, when own cultural related activities are incorporated in English learning, it engages learners to use the new language in a context that is closed linked to their daily context.

The relation between language and culture is inseparable (Kuo & Lai, 2006). For instance, by integrating *wau* making in English language classroom, it allows young children to expose to both input (language forms) and interaction (conversation) while

making a *wau*. In addition to promoting the language skills, it introduces the Malay culture. Also, stage-play such as the Malay traditional *wayang kulit* allows non-Malay children to get to know its tradition, and the alteration of script reciting in English during stage-play promotes children's English language production. The familiarity of own culture may stimulate the interest of Malay born students and motivates them to share their culture to the class with the use of English. With the richness of culture in Malaysia, integrating arts in English classroom not only benefits children, but also to develop the recognition of the rich culture in Malaysia. According to [Kuo and Lai \(2006\)](#), due to the diversity of culture and ethnicity in a classroom, students could be utilized as the learning resource. In Malaysia multicultural classroom, students could be invited to present aspects of their own cultural related topics. An artwork can be used to describe a narrative history of cultures and community. Hence, learners are exposed to the diverse culture. This allows them to connect their native culture and target language during the activity, meanwhile, introducing their native culture to other students from different ethnicity. Besides, participation of arts activities promotes collaborative learning and group accomplishment which reduce the sense of individualism.

Psychologically, integrating learners' culture as learning input has positive impacts on L2 learning ([Wutun, Arafah, & Yassi, 2018](#)). It creates a low anxiety, generates emotional experiences, and provides a fun learning atmosphere particularly for learners of lower level. As art activities bridge the less familiar culture content (the L2 - English) with own's culture, it enables learners to express themselves in English freely. Furthermore, study of [Saraswati, Hartoyo, and Fadwati \(2018\)](#) indicates that learners' culture may serve as the 'departing point' of intercultural communication. As such, the English language bridges the gap of cultural difference in a multicultural classroom in Malaysia context. Hence, promoting the unity among multiethnicity.

3. Conclusion

The perspective of Vygotsky's SCT plays a significant role in the multicultural classroom such as in the Malaysian context. It helps educators to understand and best respond pedagogically to the diverse learning context of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic. Language and culture are intertwined so as arts. [Thirusanku and Yunus \(2016\)](#) suggested that learning is better facilitated by multicultural repertoires. Therefore, integration of arts bridges the gap of cultural diversity and the use of English in the classroom promotes intercultural communication. However, in Malaysia, art education is undermined and seen as insignificance in the school curriculum ([Nasuruddin, 2018](#)). The emphasis given to arts in the early learning sector in Malaysia is limited ([Teng, Hutagalung, & Chew, 2020](#)). Besides focusing language teaching on linguistic skills, integrating other aspects in language teaching and learning engages holistic learning especially towards young learners. As such, paralleled to the integrated approach suggested in KSPK, arts activities provide an interactive context that includes concrete demonstration and hand-on activities that optimize child learning. They bridge the language knowledge of learners' L1 with the linguistic schema of learner's L2. In Malaysia multicultural context, integrating arts in language learning classrooms unites the diversity of races and ethnic groups by acting as the cultural tool to bridge the diverse cultures and languages in the society. Studies on the integration of arts into language learning among Malaysian children is underexposed. Hence, future studies may investigate the implication of art activities in English learning among Malaysian children for a more optimized English learning experience and how it benefits English learning in the multicultural context such as Malaysia such as promoting multiculturalism.

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