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**Negotiating language, literacy and identity:
A sociocultural perspective on
children's learning strategies in a
multilingual ESL classroom in Singapore***

LAWRENCE JUN ZHANG

Abstract

This article reports on part of a larger study investigating children's language learning strategies (LLSs) for bringing to bear on the range and patterns of such strategies for enhancing children's self-regulated engagement in biliteracy learning. Taking a case study approach, the study describes the process of the language learning activities in order to answer two research questions: (1) Do elementary schoolchildren use LLSs in meaningful interaction? (2) If they do, how do they negotiate language, literacy and identity in this process? A cloze passage task was set for 36 children to complete in groups of 5 each. Two methods were used in tandem in data analysis – data reduction and interpretation and connecting the inter-relationships and offering explanations. Results show that children use LLSs, as do adults, although the level of cognitive engagement differs; and that 'successful' and 'less successful' learners contribute to the meaningful interaction in different ways. Counting LLSs is not as significant as scrutinising learners' effort for negotiating language, literacy and identity. I conclude that there is a need to nestle and reframe a cognitive view of language acquisition within a socially-imbedded system so that these commonly used constructs are not treated in isolation but in osmosis so that they are understood as "interactionally open and ecologically situated" (Canangarajah 2007: 936). Pedagogical implications of context-sensitive and culturally suitable strategies-based instruction are also discussed.

Keywords: bilingualism; bilingual learner strategies in classroom interaction; literacy; identity; sociocultural theory; Singapore.

1. Introduction

Language learning/learner strategy (LLS) research, since its initiation in the 1970s (Stern 1975; Wong Fillmore 1976; Naiman et al. 1978), has a tradition of examining second language (L2) learners' patterns of strategy use in relation to language learning outcomes. The intention is to transfer the strategies that 'successful' language learners use to those who are 'less successful', in the hope that the latter will be assisted in their efforts for more effective language learning. This research has been revitalized these years, especially after the publication of Cohen and Macaro (2007a), where the authors propose a task-based approach to studying LLSs. Nevertheless, hitherto, the majority of the studies reported in the literature are about adult or young adult learners. Research on elementary schoolchildren or young learners is insufficient, if not scarce; how these learners process the linguistic input for acquiring L2 language skills through deployment of LLSs, if any, in interaction, remains unclear (cf. Chamot and El-Dinary 1999; Oliver 2002; Willet 1995; Wong Fillmore 1976). More importantly, how the process of language learning is related to their negotiation of literacy and identity is little explored (cf. Block 2007a; Norton 1995; Norton and Toohey 2001). It is especially so as regards elementary schoolchildren who are required to learn English as the main language subject in the school curriculum alongside their mother tongue within a broad context of government-designated bilingual language policy, as is the case of Singapore (Alsagoff 2007; Pakir 2004). Worldwide, a few studies report on the strategies used by young learners, and these reports are mainly based on data from questionnaires, interviews, and think-aloud protocol analysis. This body of literature on young learners, although limited by the methodology, has offered interesting insights into how elementary schoolchildren use LLSs for acquiring an L2 (Chesterfield and Chesterfield 1985; Oliver 2002; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Purdie and Oliver 1999; Zhang et al. 2008a). Given that social interaction is one of the many and perhaps most important ways in which children develop their language, literacy and identity (Norton 1997; Norton and Toohey 2001; Stroud and Wee 2007), and with a "social turn" (Block 2003) in second language research (e.g., the work of Norton 1995), this paper focuses on a group of Singaporean bilingual schoolchildren who were engaged in a cloze task that was supposed to trigger interaction. Necessarily, language, literacy and identity would be expected to be revealed in the process of completing the task that had been set for investigating the issues under discussion.

Specifically, this study intends to bring to fruition what Cohen and Macaro (2007b) have recommended in LLS research, because a question that remains unanswered is what highly bilingual English learners do when they are engaged

in language learning activities that possibly invoke learning strategies. More importantly, in solving language learning tasks, what the participants do, as a way of their contribution to the completion of the learning task, deserves investigation. It is especially so when learning is regarded more as an interface of learners' cognitive aspects and the sociocultural environment in which learning takes place (Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Vygotsky 1978). In particular, the study was motivated by the following two research questions:

- 1) Do elementary schoolchildren use learning strategies for meaningful interaction in language learning?
- 2) If they do, how do they negotiate language, literacy and identity in this process in relation to their English proficiency?

2. Defining language learning/learner strategies

LLSs are usually defined as behaviors, actions, techniques, and thoughts learners engage themselves in for the purpose of understanding or using the target language (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Rubin 1975). Although different scholars have proposed different taxonomies of LLSs in the seminal work in the field, in essence they are closely related. Wong Fillmore (1976) used two terms, social and cognitive, to be a point of departure for distinguishing the various LLSs that children used. Rubin (1975) did not present a clear classification system in researching mature learners, but Oxford (1990) used four terms to categorize all the possible LLSs: cognitive, memory, social, and metacognitive, with the former two directly contributing to language learning and the latter two indirectly playing their roles in helping the learner gain competence. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) used metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective as three main categories in their classification system. Not contradicting each other, the Oxford classification system and that of O'Malley and Chamot are the most widely adopted systems in the research community. Despite the highly over-generalized nature of these taxonomies, there is now general consensus that strategies are context-dependent and task-specific. Macaro (2006: 333) proposed that researchers adopt "a small strategy within a larger framework" conceptualization. So "strategies are conceived as occurring in working memory, are described through actions, goals, and situations at *the lowest practical level* [italic original], but then related to a broad framework of strategic plans, second language processes, and second language skills" (Cohen and Macaro 2007b: 279).

In the mainstream SLA literature, interaction and negotiation are key terms that have gained prominence (Ellis 2008; Gass 2003; Long 1981). Research findings indicate that elementary L2 schoolchildren do and are able to negotiate for meaning in interaction (Oliver 2002). Cooperative interaction is beneficial because it provides learners with the opportunity to obtain comprehensible input that is uniquely modified for learners' individual circumstances (Pica and Doughty 1985; Oliver 2002; Varonis and Gass 1985). Given the apparent importance of negotiation for meaning, a number of studies examined the conditions promoting such interaction (e.g., Pica et al. 1993), although they did not show any interest in literacy and identity in this negotiation process because of their declared disengagement with learners' sociocultural aspects in acquiring a second language, as aptly pointed out by scholars such as Block (2003), Firth and Wagner (1997), and Zuengler and Miller (2006) in the field. Oxford (2007) argued that the possibility exists in SLA research, but, surprisingly, no research effort has been expended to explore how the gap between psychological and sociocultural perspectives can be bridged. Apparently, she has successfully shown that in LLS research much can be done to offer significantly meaningful insight into language learner behaviors and effective language teaching.

3. Children's language learning/learner strategies

For clarity and immediate relevance, my literature review focuses on elementary schoolchildren's use of LLSs in ESL/EFL learning. As early as 1976, Wong Fillmore (1976) found that in learning a second language, social strategies were more important for children than cognitive strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) found, however, that metacognitive strategies, comprising planning, monitoring and selective attention, among others, were the most important of all the three categories of strategies they had identified. Of the vast body of the LLS research literature, Chesterfield and Chesterfield (1985), Sugeng (1997), Chamot and El-Dinary (1999), Purdie and Oliver (1999), and Lan and Oxford (2003) included elementary schoolchildren or younger learners. Chesterfield and Chesterfield (1985) managed to identify the LLSs of bilingual elementary schoolchildren and found differences between the successful and less successful learners. More recent studies all corroborate with the findings reported in the literature. In relation to the Singapore context, Zhang and his colleagues (Zhang et al. 2008a) presented the first of its kind that focused on identifying the LLSs used by Singaporean elementary schoolchildren based on analyzing the participants' think-aloud protocols. Although their findings corroborate what has been reported in the literature, they found that expert learners were more flex-

ible in strategy choice and orchestration than their less successful peers when they were presented with reading texts, and their strategic repertoire was also richer.

Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) used a combination of data collection techniques, including observation, interview and think-aloud; Zhang et al. (2008a) made use of the think-aloud technique; the others used questionnaires (Lan and Oxford 2003; Purdie and Oliver 1999), classroom observations (Sugeng 1997), or a combination of several data collection techniques. Findings from these studies all show that young language learners use learning strategies, but the frequency and variety of strategy use differ among learners of different proficiency levels. It is now agreed that the use of LLSs is positively correlated with second language learning success. These studies also point to the fact that good or expert language learners, who are most often high achievers in language learning, orchestrate and combine strategies for efficient language learning and it is not purely the quantity of the strategies they use that makes a difference; the qualitative differences in strategy choice and orchestration distinguish significantly the expert learners from novice learners (Macaro 2006; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990).

In reviewing 30 years of LLS research and practice, Cohen and Macaro (2007b: 283) recommend that in language learner strategy research “the task-based approach should be encouraged as it appears to be a more fruitful trend than a more general-learning approach” in examining learners’ strategy use. They posit that:

The goal of any language instruction program is not only to teach the L2 for the moment, but to instil within the learner a sense of what it is like to be a life-long learner. We are increasingly living in a global world where communicative skills, in more than one language, can be not just an added bonus but rather a true necessity. Hence, having our language learners more skilled at using their strategy repertoire – whether at the elementary, secondary, tertiary, or graduate level – can ideally have both a short-term and a long-term impact. While the potential role that enhanced LLSs can have in this endeavor is great, it remains to be seen how effective the field is in harnessing that potential. (Cohen and Macaro 2007b: 284)

As Cohen and Macaro (2007a) rightly point out, the trajectory of LLS research has been mainly along a cognitive tradition, especially when different classification systems were developed (e.g., O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990), despite the fact that socio-affective strategies are also included in these systems (e.g., Oxford 2007). Nonetheless, studies on elementary schoolchildren’s use of strategies for negotiation of meaning, literacy and identity in interaction as a sociolinguistic phenomenon are still rather limited.

4. Interaction, language, literacy and identity

Li (2008) highlights that “sociolinguists see bilingualism and multilingualism as a socially constructed phenomenon and the bilingual and multilingual person is a social actor . . . language choice is not only an effective means of communication but also an act of identity” (2008: 13). Interaction is essential for language acquisition, and learners need opportunities for interaction not only for language development but also for socialization. Socialization takes different forms in terms of language choice. Scholars delineated the necessity of socialization in language acquisition and emphasized the intricate relationship between socialization and language acquisition (Block 2007b; Canagarajah 1995; Willet 1995). Canagarajah (1995) analyzed code-switching patterns in ESL in Sri Lanka. Results showed that code-switching served useful functions not only for classroom management but also for imparting the lesson content. He concluded that code-switching offered opportunities for students to negotiate values, identities and roles in the classroom, which in turn, would better prepare them for their sociolinguistic life outside the classroom.

Young (2009) proposes that Practice Theory be better able to account for the practice of language learning and teaching because it views practice as taking language as essential and does not exclude factors such as the complexity of context. Practice Theory contrasts with traditional linguistic approaches to language structure and meaning which often treat language as context-free, occurring “nowhere, nowhen, and produced by nobody” (2009: 12). This is exactly because, as Young argues, social expectations are possible reflections of choice of language, and thus self-identity has to be explored. He posits that “all talk happens somewhere, at some time, and is produced somehow by somebody for some purpose, and the approach that practice theorists have taken is that talk and its context are inseparable” (2009: 49).

Stroud and Wee (2007) highlight the differences in the onstage and offstage classroom interaction behaviors, thinkings, and positionings of Singaporean secondary school students when these students’ identities were revealed through the use of the variety of English with which they were familiar and comfortable and in which they were competent – Singapore colloquial English (SCE), usually expected to be used in daily informal communication in Singapore. SCE as a social and regional dialect of English is a basilectal form of the language, which deviates starkly from the standard norms of English used in the US or UK. Of course, the notion of ‘standard’ English can be equally debated in terms of what it really entails and what geopolitical connotations it carries. Stroud and Wee (2007) argue that instead of downplaying or even ignoring “the potential and very real negative ramifications of teaching in and through nonmainstream

languages” (2007: 50), the benefits of using nonstandard variety may not be fully understood. They maintain that:

Attention to identity should encourage a considerable rethinking of multilingual classroom practices in the direction of seriously incorporating sociocultural and political awareness into them. But this rethinking, of course, raises problems of how to conceptually link social structuration, identity and language in ways that can be practically and feasibly implemented in the classroom ... there is no doubt that English language teaching needs to pay much more attention to developing pedagogical strategies that take into account students' identity work in learning ... (Stroud and Wee 2007: 50–51).

Block (2007a) defines identity clearly with reference to various aspects involving the individual's exercising of agency. It is apparent that addressing identity in relation to the participant's use of language alone tends to lead to the researcher's holding an essentialist understanding of identity. He summarizes that “performativity and presentation of self”, “positioning”, “ambivalence”, “hybridity”, “communities of practice”, and “power and recognition” (2007a: 11–45) need to be taken into consideration. Canagarajah's (2006) proposition that identity in this post-modernism era is imbued with fluidity (i.e., identity changes over time) is an equally useful conceptualization of identity, because multidimensionality of one's identity is common in communities of practice.

The work that Norton and Toohey (2001) have done in Canada is directly relevant to the work reported here. Although good language learner (GLL) research has been conducted since the 1970s and cognitively-oriented SLA researchers have taken it for granted, Norton (1995), and Norton and Toohey (2001) challenge the notion of GLLs by taking a sociocultural approach to examining the issue (Vygotsky 1978; see also Lantolf and Thorne 2006). They argue forcefully that GLLs do not work in isolation. Instead, the proficiencies of the GLLs in their studies were not only tied up with their behavior of learning as individuals but also what their communities would offer them. They have therefore concluded that “understanding good language learning requires attention to social practices in contexts in which individuals learn L2s” (Lantolf and Thorne 2006: 318). The importance of learners' exercising of agency needs to be considered because the very process of exercising agency comes with their forming and reforming of identities.

5. Multilingual/multicultural Singapore

Located on the southern tip of the Malaya Peninsula, Singapore is a nation state of 4.8 million population comprising mainly three ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay and Indian, according to a recent population census. Since its independence in 1958, Singapore has continued to use English as its major language of communication in the media, law, education, and government. In essence, English functions as a lingua franca for all the people despite the fact that English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil are designated as the four official languages. Due to its multilingual and multicultural features, the Government of Singapore had stipulated a compulsory bilingual education policy for all schoolchildren from elementary school onwards until junior college (senior high school). What this means is that all children starting from elementary schools are required to learn two languages as required curriculum subjects – English and a Mother Tongue. All children have to study all the subjects in English except the Mother Tongue subject and its related Good Citizen (moral education) course (Pakir 2004). Depending on whether the child comes from a Chinese family, Indian family, Malay family, the Mother Tongue subject varies according to the ethnic group to which the learner belongs. All the elementary schools follow the same national curriculum although some schools offer more core-curriculum activities (CCA) such as modern dance, sports, among others, than others and are traditionally known as better performers in academic subjects as examined through the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of the 6-year program. Used in a New English context, the English that serves a wider array of purposes in society at large for daily communication deviates from that of the US, UK, or any other “Inner Circle” countries (Kachru 1992).

6. Method

6.1. *Participants*

Thirty-six schoolchildren from an ordinary neighborhood or community elementary school in Singapore were invited to participate in this study. All the pupils were in grade four, with ages ranging from 8 to 9 years, who had undergone kindergarten education where the two languages, English and a Mother Tongue, were taught informally. Upon their entry into elementary schools, English and the Mother Tongue were officially offered as compulsory curriculum subjects that were examined according to specific national syllabi. So the participants' English proficiency varied in speaking, listening, reading, writing and vocabulary. Information on participant distribution is given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participant information in the study (n = 36)*

Participants	Proficiency		Total
	High achievers	Low achievers	
Malay	2	3	5
Chinese	17	11	28
Indian	1	2	3
Sub-total	20	16	36

The class from which these pupils were selected was chosen by the Head of the English Department of the school in consultation with their English teacher, who was also the form teacher. This particular class was chosen because its overall English scores were mediocre. The department head was asked to select one pupil each from the top and the bottom groups according to their latest English examination results based on the various assessment components. When there were no exam results, teachers' continuous assessment of pupil performance was taken as the criterion. The department head was also asked to select participants according to each pupil's representativeness.

6.2. *Task material*

A cloze passage of 191 words (see Appendix) was taken from an English textbook, *Celebrate English* (Unit 4, Book 4A), a textbook series that has been widely used in elementary schools in Singapore. The textbook series was written and produced by writers and educators based in Singapore in accordance to the *English Language Syllabus* (MOE 2001), where all the texts are presented according to the text types to which the texts belong. Unit 4 typically presents information texts and narratives on a common theme "Rivers to the Sea". The cloze passage used in this study asked all the participants to fill in the blanks in groups of 6 children each. For the purpose of this study, the material was adapted slightly to remove all the potentially confusing blanks to make sure that the task would be clear to the participants. The underlying principle for using this cloze passage was to see if these children were to use these connectives such as "if", "because", "as", "since", "as a result of", "but", "however" and "either ... or" typically found in these two texts, especially if they would ever engage in interactions for meaning-oriented negotiations. These connectives are usually regarded as being able to indicate the students' academic literacy performativity as and when the formal linguistic genre is required.

6.3. *Data collection*

Following Cohen and Macaro's (2007b) recommendation for taking a task-based approach to LLS research, I collected data as part of a larger study intended to investigate young learners' LLSs for bringing to bear on the range and patterns of such strategies that children initiated in an elementary school classroom, with an ultimate aim of developing these children into self-regulated learners (Zhang et al. 2008b). I solicited help from the classroom teacher. I gave a list of instructional procedures for her to assign group work after I talked with her about how to naturally observe her pupils working together to solve problems in language learning. All the children were assigned to different groups with a good mixture of learners of different ethnic backgrounds to make sure that they used English in negotiation or discussion. A typical group of six pupils consisted of three 'successful' or high achievers and three 'unsuccessful' learners or low achievers. Although there was no specific requirement for any seating arrangement, there was a specification for the number of children to be placed in each group. The participants were audio and video recorded.

The audio-recordings of the task that was completed in one 30-minute session in a normal classroom environment were transcribed and verified against the video-recordings. The transcripts comprised mainly the conversations among the group members on the task at hand. Many times the transcripts were unedited representations of the local nativized and institutionalized variety of English in spoken exchanges recorded in conventional English orthography, and included all speech signals (e.g., hesitations, repetitions and insertions of utterance-final particles such as *lah*, *lor*, *meh*, *hor* and *ah* as used daily in verbal communication). Discrepancies were checked and confirmed by a colleague by viewing the video-recordings. The inter-rater reliability was 93%, a level that was considered highly acceptable. In order to follow the principle of anonymity, all the participants that are in the focus groups were assigned a code such as S1, S2, S3, and so on.

6.4. *Data analysis*

Adopting a case study approach to providing "holistic" and "context-sensitive" descriptions of the learning activities (Patton 2001; Zhu and David 2008), I took field notes by keeping a distance from the children in order to describe "objectively" the process of the language learning activities which could invoke the use of learning strategies among 36 young learners and the process of how their Singaporean identity was performed in completing the learning task. Van Lier (2005: 205) explains that "cases are specific persons, places, or events that are interesting and worthy intensive study. The case is a real-life entry that

operates in a specific time and place.” So, I also resorted to video recordings as a way of illustrating typical patterns of schoolchildren’s strategies as well as their differences in strategy use in that particular location during that time. Two methods were used in tandem in data analysis: data reduction/interpretation and connecting the inter-relationships/offering explanations.

The conversations among the members in different groups focusing on the same learning task were analyzed to look for typical patterns of strategy use in negotiation for meaning. The O’Malley and Chamot frame, which classifies LLSs into three broad categories (metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective) was used as the main framework in data deduction, and the negotiation strategies as described in Long (1981) and Pica and Doughty (1985), as adopted in Oliver (2002), were used as additional resources for categorizing the negotiation strategies when they surfaced from the data. I was aware that the strategies listed in Pica and Doughty (1985) and Oliver (2002) overlap with the strategies in the O’Malley and Chamot’s tripartite classification system, so they were re-examined according to the O’Malley and Chamot (1990) framework.

7. Findings and discussion

To better illustrate the typical features for answering the two research questions, I focus on individual schoolchildren to discuss the differences between the ‘successful’ and the ‘less successful’ learners. I also intend to show how the ‘successful’ and the ‘less successful’ learners contributed to the progression of the language learning task for the purpose of improving their linguistic proficiency and competence in negotiating meaning in social interaction. I was clearly aware that the use of words such as ‘successful’ and ‘less successful’ could be loaded with other connotations, but for convenience, they were used to refer to two categories of learners, ‘high achievers’ and ‘low achievers’ in schools.

7.1. *Strategies for negotiating language, literacy and identity*

The negotiation strategies as observed being used by the elementary schoolchildren were a mixture of metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies. Despite a difficulty in clearly distinguishing metacognitive from cognitive strategies, confirmation checks and comprehension checks are two clear metacognitive strategies. *Clarification requests* are made by the interlocutor to clarify what is said and include statements such as “what do you mean?”, “what’s that?”, “I don’t understand”, “is this what you said?” The use of such strategies also helps

the participants to maintain group dynamics in the process of their getting feedback or information. *Confirmation checks* are statements by the interlocutor for making sure that the communication is correct. They may include repetitions accompanied by rising intonation, e.g., “it should be used, right?” *Comprehension checks* are made by the interlocutor to check that the preceding utterance has been correctly understood by the listener. So they are basically for monitoring comprehension. They usually comprise questions, either tag questions, repetition with rising intonation, or questions such as “[Do you] understand or not?”, or “can [you] read or not?”

Cognitive strategies such as self-repetitions, re-reading, contextualization, inferencing and grouping help the learners in utilizing the cognitive resources available, so in many cases both high achievers and low achievers use them despite differences in quantity and quality. This is because, for example, self-repetitions are the speaker’s partial, exact, and expanded repetitions of lexical items from his or her own preceding utterances within the speaking turns (see Oliver 2002 for more information).

Socio-affective strategies include cooperating with one or more peers to obtain feedback, pool information, or model a language activity and questioning for clarification by asking a teacher to repeat, paraphrase, explain or offer examples. Requesting for clarification (clarification requests) often operates on the participants’ understanding of why there is such a necessity. So it is not only socio-affective but also metacognitive. We turn to S6, Tom, and then to S2, Jimmy, for a quick snapshot analysis of the strategies they used for completing the language learning task so that a comparison can be made between the ‘expert’ or ‘successful’ and the ‘novice’ or ‘less successful’ schoolchildren in terms of how they negotiated language and literacy, and how their identities were naturally brought out.

7.2. *Differences between high and low achievers*

7.2.1. *High achievers*

Due to space, I present only one excerpt below and interpret the data within the frameworks explained earlier. Excerpt 1 typically presents a series of negotiation moves in the class activity with the cloze task as the organizing trigger. S6, as a high achiever, was proud of being asked to participate in this group activity. In fact, due to his high level of English proficiency that is usually associated with ‘successful’ learners, he was able to talk about things that interested him. The cloze task intended to solicit learners’ use of strategies, particularly global strategies for maintaining discourse continuity. Those who were categorized

into 'high achievers', namely, S4, S5, and S6, were able not only to initiate the conversation in negotiating meaning but they were right in most of the cases. They used a wide range of strategies for negotiating language for getting the meaning across. They predicted the content of the text, as shown in dyad 1 by S6 "the text is about clean rivers in Singapore". "Re-reading" (dyad 6) and "contextualization" (dyad 8), "inferencing" (dyad 9), and "confirmation checks" (dyad 9) are other strategies that are easily identifiable. The orchestration of these strategies by these learners apparently suggests that they were more proficient in approaching a written text through the deployment of strategies although the language they used is SCE.

It is noticeable that the high achievers were treated as such due to their higher levels of English proficiency as measured by the standard tests for assessing the candidates' academic proficiency. This might be the reason why they stood out markedly as high achievers. Nonetheless, due to the multilingual and multicultural environment in which they lived and studied, even the high achievers frequently used features of SCE. Even English teachers spoke with such features in the classroom to enhance the 'chemistry' between them and their students sometimes despite the Ministry of Education's (MOE 2001: 3) mandate that the English taught in Singapore should be "internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture", and by definition, "internationally acceptable English refers to the formal register of English used in different parts of the world, that is, standard English" (ibid.).

Excerpt 1

Children		Dyad
S6	This text is about clean rivers in Singapore. Hmm... Is it about Singapore River? I cannot see. I need to read. Eh, how about you (S2)?	1
S2	I think so <i>lah</i> . The text look like an information report.	2
S5	It must be. It mentioned rivers in Singapore. Let me read it again.	3
S2	Agree. We must try to fill in words first.	4
S3	Ok. I don't know <i>leh</i> . Which word did you put in?	5
S6	I want to put in "if" for this blank, cos "fish and other living things will die". "If" should be used, right?" Agree or not?	6
S1	Yah <i>hor</i> , read well with "if".	7
S5	So what about next one? Can we fill in "but"? The earlier sentence says something different ...	8
S4	Yes, but what about the coma there. I don't see "but" used like this <i>ah</i> . Serious. It just doesn't read right <i>leh</i> . Do you understand what I am saying or not? Hmm...	9

Excerpt 1		
Children		Dyad
S5	Can we put in “however”? Let us try it, ok?	10
All	Can.	11
S6	Yes, this is it. Do you agree?	12
S5	Me too. .. Yes, agree.	13
S3	Yah <i>loh</i> .	14
S2	You <i>meh</i> (“you”, a Chinese word, meaning “have” or “there is a . . .” and <i>meh</i> is a particle forming an interrogative sentence, so the meaning of this utterance is “is there such an answer?”)? Oh yah <i>hor</i> . I didn’t get it first, but now it’s clear... “however” is good, is it? Ok <i>lah</i> ...	15

As the *English Language Syllabus* (MOE 2001: 4) focuses on language use, learning outcomes, text types and grammar, students are expected to understand “how to communicate fluently, appropriately and effectively in internationally acceptable English. They need to understand how the language system works and how language conventions can vary according to purpose, audience, context and culture, and apply this knowledge in speech and writing in both formal and informal situations.” The way S6 and his other peers used SCE features in their discussions could be understood to indicate their intuitive knowledge about the difference between the formal and the informal registers. This explicit and implicit display of their literacy skills specifically represented by the use of particular literacy genres or text types does not avail them of any chance of giving up the use of SCE features. This alignment with a Singaporean identity says it all.

7.2.2. Low achievers

As a low achiever in the group, S2, Jimmy, appeared lacking confidence at the onset. However, as is evident, this psychological constraint did not restrict his willingness to share. In fact, the very move he made to approach the text by asking his group members to look at the text type of it indicates that he was actually quite on task. As he said it, “the text looks like an information report” (dyad 2). Although it is now commonplace that all elementary schoolchildren had been well-exposed to a variety of text types, including narratives, recounts, information reports, explanations and expositions (arguments, discussions), by virtue of the *English Language Syllabus* (MOE 2001) explicating these terms, the fact that a low achiever like S2 mentioned it in approaching a written text deserves some attention. Normally, teachers’ expectation is that only good learners are able to regurgitate and apply the key concepts delivered in the language class-

room as per curriculum cycle, but 'less successful' learners such as S2 were also able to mention and apply the text type knowledge. Evidently, teachers' pedagogical approach and the textbooks used with this group of pupils had a clear bearing, and they should. The question to be asked naturally is "why didn't the 'successful' learner do this?" In fact, the answer to it is a provocative one. The assessment that was used to gauge the participants' overall proficiency was based on their performativity of academic literacy – namely accuracy in using standard English, though the term standard is a highly contentious and debatable concept in this post-colonial and post-modernism era. This explains why they were categorized into low achievers despite the fact that they were able to contribute to their learning community to co-construct meaning.

Different from the three high achievers, the 'low achievers', on the whole, were not as capable as their stronger peers in providing the right answers. Nonetheless, they were not deprived of any opportunity in the negotiation process, as it were. In most cases, their ability to negotiate for meaning was well brought out, but their relatively low linguistic ability disadvantaged them. They seldom overshadowed their stronger peers by offering the right choices for the blanks in the first place. Instead, many of the contributions were in the form of giving consent or expressing consensus through formulaic expressions such as "I agree", "I think so", or in some cases, simply a declaration of their lack of such linguistic knowledge. Their inability in linguistic expression and their prominent use of SCE as represented by the use of particles like "*lah*", "*loh*", and "*meh*" did not bar them from participation in the group activity. On the contrary, the negotiation process went on smoothly and as a matter of fact, none of the members noticed these features. Being Singaporeans, they might feel more comfortable with these features, as, typically, in addition to English being used in ways peculiar to the speech community in Singapore that can identify its speakers as inner group members, accent is necessarily a strong defining characteristic of their identities. Also, the informal task-based learning environment might have reinforced their understanding of the nature of the learning task. The 'situated' nature of the learning community should have its own practice, and it is commonly shared knowledge that served as the ground for the very productive completion of the task within the community of practice. Therefore, they resorted to the basilectal form for meaningful interaction for the construction of meaning, possibly in the spirit of building a learning community, where everyone was expected to contribute.

The "social turn" (Block 2003) has made it imperative that learners' interactive moves in language classrooms be examined for a better understanding of the more socially informed decisions they make. This is because socialization is crucial in second language acquisition (Block 2007a; Gass 2003; Pica and

Doughty 1985). In a similar vein, Canagarajah (2007) posits that it is necessary to nestle and reframe a cognitive view of language acquisition within a socially-embedded system so that these commonly used constructs are not treated in isolation.

Although Firth and Wagner (1997) argued for rectifying the imbalance between the dichotomies that characterize SLA, we are now moving toward more radical options of reframing the constructs. The previously ignored or suppressed constructs are now becoming the basis for a new integration or synthesis. Language acquisition is based on performance strategies, purposive uses of the language, and interpersonal negotiations in fluid communicative contexts. The previously dominant constructs such as form, cognition, and the individual are not eradicated; they get redefined to adopt hybrid, variable, situational, and processual characteristics they did not have before. (Canagarajah 2007: 936)

This sociocultural view of language acquisition offers a new perspective on the language learning process in relation to this group of Singaporean schoolchildren being schooled in English. We can see clearly that there is a need for teachers and researchers to treat the cognitive “in a more socially embedded, interactionally open, and ecological situated manner” (Canagarajah 2007: 936) to expedite the acquisition process through language use in designing and implementing curricular materials. It is clear that these ‘less successful’ schoolchildren’s use of English is inaccurate, and their speech is frequently permeated with local dialectal features typical of any new variety of English. Canagarajah (2006) forcefully argues that “the changing pedagogical priorities suggest that we have to move away from a reliance on discrete-item tests on formal grammatical competence . . . and assessment would focus on strategies of negotiation, situated performance, communicative repertoire, and language awareness” (2006: 229).

In this sense, it is evident that, more often than not, language learning did take place, or at least the negotiation process for learning did really proceed in interaction which was socially co-constructed by the learning community. The commonly accepted strategies for negotiation of meaning were well accepted in this community of practice, where these children’s willingness to share and contribute whatever they knew to the learning community can be taken as a positive attribute; their pragmatic use of the language in the negotiation process, despite its inaccuracy if framed with a grammaticality judgement test, suggests that successful ESL schoolchildren understood how to use the language for maintaining the conversation or discussion, and it is especially the case for those “more capable peers”, who were ready to pitch in without realizing that they were doing a service to the other peers. Even the less capable learners made the grade in jelling with their peers through typical utterances

used in the daily social life of Singaporeans. In this negotiation process, these schoolchildren used repair/self-repetition, clarification requests, and confirmation checks alongside “other consensus-oriented and mutually supportive practices” (Canagarajah 2006: 238). It is not only the number of strategies or the variety of strategies used by these children that distinguished them from one another despite the importance of strategy deployment and orchestration in language processing for linguistic gains. Rather, it is the ability to communicate through the deployment of strategies for social interaction for the purpose of learning the language material that did really make a difference, especially for the learners under discussion.

Clarification requests were found to be the most frequent strategy used by children in their negotiation of meaning. It was particularly the case for the ‘successful’ learners. Nonetheless, the purpose of the kind of negotiation is usually framed according to the defining parameters of SLA: form, cognition and the individual (e.g., Oliver 2002). The limited nature of the learning material used in the present study could be a platform where ‘form’, ‘cognition’ and the ‘individual’ dominated. The patterns of the children’s negotiation suggest that instead of only focusing on the form of the language, meaningful discussion was “based on performance strategies, purposive uses of the language, and interpersonal negotiations in fluid communicative contexts” (Canagarajah 2006: 238).

Sociocultural theory regards learning as essentially taking place in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This is because, as Vygotsky (1978) explains, “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978: 86). In this sense, learning is not an individual activity but one that involves others in the learning community and is to a great extent interpersonal, and collaboration is important. Language is a mediating tool between the individual and the learning environment (Vygotsky 1978). This is the reason why quite a number of participants started with “private speech” rehearsals before really engaging themselves in the interaction as a way of regulating any complex task that they would have to handle (see Lantolf and Thorne 2006).

8. Conclusion

The study was set up to answer the Singapore Ministry of Education’s call of a “Teach Less, Learn More” initiative. As a start, it was interested in finding out how Singaporean elementary schoolchildren learn English (Zhang et al. 2008b).

The preliminary findings suggest that strategies are important for negotiation of meaning, and that schoolchildren did really attempt at using strategies in different ways. The differences between the high achievers and low achievers as benchmarked against standardized tests administered by the school according to the academic norms were obvious. These differences lie in the larger number of strategies used by the high achievers or 'successful' learners. However, the low achievers or the 'less successful' schoolchildren also displayed their strength in having certain strategy repertoires that the successful schoolchildren did not orchestrate. This gives rise to the question of the validity of strategy number count.

In fact, it was found that knowing how to negotiate as an important metacognitive strategy at the level of 'planning' was as important as knowing how a particular word was used, or how the language system works in its own right (see e.g., Cohen and Macaro 2007a; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Zhang forthcoming). However, the patterns of the schoolchildren's negotiation in this study suggest that their performance strategies, purposive uses of the language, and interpersonal negotiations in context-specific communication through the use of SCE features are more significant in helping them chart their learning journeys. This is because talking and socializing are important facets of language acquisition for children. In fact, the way that the learners resorted to the various strategies for negotiation of meaning might also be indicative of their exercising agency that is closely connected to their identities. Norton (1995) and Block (2007b) rightly posit that language learners' relationship to the target language is socially and historically constructed. In Norton's understanding, language learners' 'investment' in the target language reflects their complex history and multiple desires; their investment in the language is also an investment in their own identities, which change over time and space (Norton 1997).

As mentioned earlier, these schoolchildren were bilingual/biliteracy learners, who had to face challenges of learning the two required language subjects. Instead of only relying on counting their use of strategies in interaction, we have to see how effectively their communication needs were met. Thus, these Singaporean schoolchildren who were speakers and users of the New English variety have to be understood in light of the bidialectal and bilingual backgrounds against which they were raised in a multilingual society. Any attempt to despise them for the idiosyncratic use of the language unique in its own way may not put them to any advantage. Assessment that was based on the standardized test as the one used in this study might not have been able to reveal many aspects of the asset they had as bilingual, and in some cases, multilingual, users (Canagarajah 2006).

This could be the case for schoolchildren in other similar contexts. Just as Li (2008) recommends, "a comprehensive understanding of any complex social

phenomenon as bilingualism and multilingualism required contributions from a variety of disciplines. The multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach has definitely generated research outcomes that challenge the received wisdom about the human mind and society. But being multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary does not in itself entail innovation” (2008: 16). My study resorted to sociocultural theory as a lens through which bilingual schoolchildren’s use of strategies for negotiating meaning, literacy and identity was explored. It is obvious that further research needs to address issues such as why bilingual schoolchildren use these strategies and what their preoccupations are when they are engaged in the learning task. Methods such as longitudinal observations, cross-sectional investigation, or immediate retrospective interview can be employed to find out the bilingual schoolchildren’s rationale for the communication behavior (see Zhu and David 2008). Once findings emerge, teachers will have evidence that will point to a necessity for helping these learners enhance their understanding of how language works in society, or more specifically, in classroom interaction. The aim of teaching is to offer the essential scaffolding which the schoolchildren need so that they can learn to make and construct meaning in the “Zone of Proximal Development” (Vygotsky 1978) to ultimately achieve high levels of linguistic and sociolinguistic performance competencies independently, which will serve the speech community in culturally suitable ways.

The Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE 2001) mandates that “English is one of the four official languages in Singapore. As the language of public administration, education, commerce, science and technology, and global communication, it has become the medium by which most Singaporeans gain access to information and knowledge from around the world. The ability to speak and write English effectively, therefore, has become an essential skill in the workplace, and a mastery of English is vital to Singapore’s pupils” (2001: 2). While this policy statement is valid, when it comes to classroom practice, schoolchildren had no choice but use the nonstandard variety, SCE, if they wished to maintain the flow of the discussion (Alsagoff 2007; Stroud and Wee 2007). This is because, as Singaporeans, who are mainly speakers of English in a New English context, their use of the language is closely tied to their mother tongues, including their cultural traditions, values, and identities. These schoolchildren’s language development needs also to be understood within a framework of linguistic ecology in addition to the developmental stages that they have to go through as do schoolchildren in Australia, US, or UK. The findings from this study might shed some light on pedagogical practice in contexts similar to that of Singapore.

Although differences exist in the specific definitions of LLSs, as mentioned above, instructional practices implemented by teachers rely heavily on these

important findings (see Cohen and Macaro 2007a). Thus, the findings from this study might be able to offer further insights into elementary school classrooms where it might be necessary for teachers to incorporate strategies-based instruction into the language curriculum. Nonetheless, teachers must understand that a strategies-based instruction program should take into consideration the sociocultural context and schoolchildren's lived experiences such as their bidialectal/ multilingual backgrounds, their daily use of the language as a lingua franca on top of the curriculum requirement as an academic subject in schools, their affiliations to the New English variety they use, among others. By doing so, teachers not only render good service in equipping the schoolchildren with the strategies of how to learn English more effectively; they also give these schoolchildren opportunities to explore possibilities for wider and more effective communication within their own means of the linguistic resources they are endowed with, and without being coerced to follow the exnormative academic standards. After all, as Zhang argues (2004), communicativity, intelligibility, and socially meaningful engagement are the core elements in human interaction and learning.

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Appendix: Cloze task material

Clean rivers in Singapore

Many rivers in the world are in danger because of pollution. _____waste from factories and housing areas is dumped into the river, fish and other living things in the river will die. _____, we have a choice. We can vhelp to clean up our rivers as part of a group _____ work on our own.

In the 1970s, housing, factory and farm waste polluted the river. _____, it was not safe to fish or even swim in the water. In 1977, the government of Singapore challenged the people to make the river safe for fishing within ten years. It was a lot of work, _____ it was well worth the effort. By 1987, the pollution had been removed _____ the river was clean enough for fish. _____, work on the river did not stop.

Walkways, restaurants, shops and parks were built along the riverbanks _____ the idea was for people to use the river again. _____you go to the riverside today, you will see many Singaporeans and tourists enjoying themselves _____ the river is clean and pleasant.

Note

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