



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**PEER INTERACTION AND MEANING CONSTRUCTION AMONG ESL
LEARNERS IN COMPREHENDING TEXTS IN SECOND LANGUAGE
CONTEXT**

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By

ZAIRA ABU HASSAN SHAARI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
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December 2008



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Faculty: Educational Studies

This study investigates patterns of peer interaction in the context of an English-As-A-Second Language (ESL) Secondary School Classroom, where learners work in groups and pairs on seven different reading tasks. It considers the manifestation of the learners' comprehension of the reading texts through the ways they constructed meaning together. The three research questions that served to guide this study are: 1) What are the patterns of interactions employed by ESL secondary school learners when they are engaged in discussions of reading texts? 2) How do the ESL secondary school learners construct meaning during their discussions of the texts? 3) What are the conditions contributing to the emerging patterns of interactions to arrive at meaning?

The study was classroom-based and exploratory in nature. Research was conducted in the natural setting of a classroom and the reading tasks were part of the regular class work. Data for the study came from a number of sources: audio recording of the learners' talk as they



completed the reading tasks, video recording of the lessons as they progressed, observation notes, a background questionnaire survey, a series of interviews with two groups of learners and the completed tasks. The data were analysed for distinct patterns of interaction and strategy use. The approach to data analysis was qualitative in nature where categories to describe the patterns of interactions emerged from a reiterative analysis of the data. The interviews and survey data of two groups of learners were used for more detailed analysis. Each group represented a distinct pattern of peer interaction.

The results from this study are discussed with relation to the sociocultural framework which views human cognitive development as originating from social interaction and language plays a mediating role in that development. Two distinct patterns of interaction were found to predominate in the data: collaborative and dominant/passive. The differences in these patterns were distinguishable in terms of the willingness of group members to work together on all aspects of the task and the willingness to contribute and engage with each other's contribution. The collaborative pattern is characterized by the co-construction of meaning where learners worked on understanding, involved and supported each other, ideas were deliberated in great length and developed into something more complex and mutually acceptable.

As for the dominant-passive pattern, learners worked together, however, there was limited engagement with each other's contribution and ideas. This resulted in brief discussions of aspects of the texts, long pauses, abandonment of discussions, acceptance of shallow answers and dictation of answers by the 'expert' which was rarely challenged by the others in the



group. As with the collaborative group, these learners were found to employ reading comprehension strategies frequently, particularly at a more textually explicit level, such as reading aloud part/parts of the texts during the discussions. There was also evidence of the use of higher level reading comprehension strategies, however, these strategies were produced by different individuals in the group and they were often moves that were not followed up and deliberated by the others. These learners were only able to resolve 28% of the textual issues collaboratively and 56% were not resolved at all.

The patterns of peer interaction remained largely stable across the different types of reading tasks, classroom instructions (group work and pair work) and across time for more proficient learners. As for the weaker learners, the patterns of peer interaction remained stable across the group tasks, however, when these learners worked in pairs with others who had similar backgrounds and proficiency levels, they demonstrated different interaction behaviours. During these activities, the learners were more active and they employed more discourse strategies, nonetheless, many episodes were not resolved collaboratively and there was still limited engagement with each other's contribution.

Discussions were generally motivated by the ultimate aim of producing correct or acceptable answers. This was often emphasized by the teacher in her instructions and during class discussions. Because of these expectations, the more knowledgeable learners' were found to summarize and dictate the answers and make moves to reread and amend these answers until they felt satisfied. The efforts to produce correct or acceptable answers had also led the



learners, especially those from the dominant-passive group, to stay close to the texts and to find meanings from the texts instead of exploring possible interpretations.

Differences in the patterns of peer interaction and their characteristics can be explained by certain conditions that form the situational context in which the interactions take place. In this study, the conditions contributing to the emerging patterns of interaction were found to be the learners' proficiency in the L2 and their orientation to the activity, which were shaped by their motives, goals and perceived roles. Other conditions that helped shape the ways the learners construct meaning were the teacher and her instructional beliefs and practice and her selection of tasks. The results have important pedagogical implications, particularly for the practice of using pair and group work to promote comprehension of L2 texts in the second language reading classrooms.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**INTERAKSI PELAJAR DAN PEMBINAAN MAKNA DALAM MEMAHAMI TEKS
DI KALANGAN PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA**

Oleh

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Kajian ini memerinci corak interaksi pelajar di dalam konteks kelas Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (ESL) di sebuah sekolah menengah, di mana pelajar-pelajar membincangkan teks bacaan secara berkumpulan atau berpasangan. Kajian ini adalah cubaan untuk melihat pemahaman pelajar melalui cara mereka membina makna dalam perbincangan teks yang ditulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Tiga soalan yang telah digubal untuk kajian adalah: 1) Apakah corak-corak interaksi yang dihasilkan oleh pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (ESL) semasa mereka membincangkan teks Bahasa Inggeris? 2) Bagaimana pelajar tersebut membina makna semasa mereka membincangkan teks Bahasa Inggeris? 3) Apakah keadaan-keadaan yang menyumbang kepada corak interaksi yang terhasil apabila pelajar membina makna?

Kajian ini adalah berasaskan bilik darjah dan ia bersifat eksplotari. Kajian dilakukan dalam sebuah kelas dan tugas yang diperhatikan adalah sebahagian daripada aktiviti biasa kelas



tersebut. Data kajian dikumpul dari berbagai sumber: rakaman audio perbualan pelajar semasa mereka menjalankan tugas, rakaman video sepanjang kelas berjalan, pemerhatian kelas, soalselidik yang bertujuan mengumpul maklumat latarbelakang pelajar-pelajar yang terlibat, temubual dengan dua kumpulan pelajar dan contoh-contoh tugas yang telah dilengkapkan. Data dianalisis secara pendekatan kualitatif untuk mengenalpasti corak-corak interaksi dan penggunaan strategi. Kategori-kategori untuk pengelasan data terhasil dari analisis reiteratif. Soalselidik dan temubual dengan pelajar digunakan untuk membuat kajian yang lebih mendalam.

Hasil dapatan dibincang dari sudut sosiokultural yang berpandangan bahawa perkembangan kognitif manusia terhasil daripada interaksi social dan bahasa merupakan satu mediasi dalam proses tersebut. Dua corak interaksi yang terhasil adalah kolaboratif dan dominan/pasif. Perbezaan di antara dua corak interaksi ini dapat dilihat melalui kemahuan pelajar untuk bekerjasama dalam menjalankan tugas dan kemahuan untuk menyumbang dalam perbincangan serta memberi perhatian kepada sumbangan orang lain. Ciri-ciri kolaboratif yang dapat dilihat adalah pembinaan makna secara bersama di mana pelajar cuba untuk memahami maksud teks, mereka melibatkan dan menyokong satu sama lain, idea-idea dibincang secara mendalam dan hasilnya adalah sesuatu idea yang lebih bermakna dan diterima oleh semua secara mutual.

Bagi corak dominan-pasif pula, didapati bahawa pelajar berbincang dan berkerja-sama namun mereka tidak menunjukkan penglibatan sepenuhnya dalam idea yang diberikan oleh orang lain. Ini mengakibatkan perbincangan yang ringkas, perbincangan yang terhenti begitu

saja, penerimaan jawapan yang cetek serta penerimaan cadangan yang diberi oleh orang tertentu yang berperanan sebagai ‘pakar rujuk’ dalam kumpulan tersebut. Sama seperti kumpulan kolaboratif, pelajar-pelajar ini didapati kerap menggunakan strategi pemahaman bacaan, terutamanya strategi tekstual seperti membaca teks dengan kuat sewaktu perbincangan. Mereka juga didapati ada menggunakan strategi pemahaman bacaan bertahap tinggi, namun strategi ini dihasilkan secara individu dan ia tidak dibincang dan dikupas secara berkumpulan. Pelajar ini hanya dapat menyelesaikan 28% daripada isu tekstual secara berkolaborasi dan 56% tidak diselesaikan langsung.

Corak interaksi pelajar yang mahir berbahasa Inggeris boleh dikatakan stabil bagi setiap tugas yang diberi, cara perbincangan yang berbeza (sama ada kerja berkumpulan atau berpasangan) mahupun pada waktu yang berlainan. Bagi pelajar yang kurang mahir pula, corak interaksi adalah stabil sewaktu perbincangan berkumpulan namun apabila mereka berbincang secara berpasangan, mereka menunjukkan corak yang agak berbeza. Sewaktu menjalankan aktiviti-aktiviti ini, pelajar lebih aktif dan mereka menggunakan lebih banyak strategi. Namun begitu, banyak isu tekstual tidak diselesaikan secara berkolaborasi dan perhatian kepada sumbangan orang lain adalah terhad.

Secara amnya, didapati tujuan utama perbincangan adalah untuk mendapatkan jawapan yang tepat dan dapat diterima. Perkara ini selalu ditekankan oleh guru tersebut dalam arahan yang diberi atau sewaktu perbincangan bersama pelajar. Kerana arahan ini, pelajar yang lebih berkemampuan didapati selalu memberi ringkasan jawapan, memeriksa jawapan berulang-kali dan memindanya jika mereka tidak berpuas hati. Cubaan untuk menghasilkan jawapan

yang tepat dan dapat diterima kerap mendorong pelajar, terutamanya pelajar dari kumpulan dominan-pasif, untuk mencari jawapan di dalam teks dan tidak mencuba untuk mencari dan membuat interpretasi daripada teks tersebut.

Perbezaan dalam corak interaksi pelajar dan ciri-cirinya boleh dikaitkan dengan beberapa keadaan yang menjadi konteks situasi di mana interaksi berlaku. Dalam kajian ini, keadaan-keadaan yang menyumbang kepada corak interaksi yang terhasil apabila pelajar membina makna adalah kemahiran bertutur dalam Bahasa Inggeris serta orientasi pelajar terhadap aktiviti yang dilalui. Orientasi ini terbentuk daripada motif, matlamat dan anggapan peranan yang dimainkan oleh pelajar. Keadaan lain yang membentuk cara pelajar membina makna adalah guru itu sendiri, pendirian serta amalannya di dalam kelas, serta pemilihan tugasan dan aktiviti. Hasil kajian ini mempunyai implikasi dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran, terutamanya dalam amalan kerja berkumpulan dan berpasangan dalam memberi kefahaman pelajar kepada teks Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua dalam kelas bacaan.

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The thesis is dedicated to my late father, Allahyarham Abu Hassan Shaari b. Mat Awin.



I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 5 December 2008 to conduct the final examination of Zaira Abu Hassan Shaari on her thesis entitled “Peer Interaction and Meaning Construction among ESL Learners in Comprehending Texts in Second Language Context” in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

ZAIRA BT ABU HASSAN SHAARI

Date: 2 February 2008



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	English as a Second Language
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
NSs	Native Speakers
NNSs	Non-native Speakers
PMR	Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary Examination)
SLA	Second Language Learning
SPM	Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education)
CRP	Class Reader Programme
TL	Target language



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, which includes a brief background information on the aims and objectives of the English language syllabus, particularly where reading is concerned, related programmes that have been implemented to promote L2 reading, a discussion on the significance of peer interaction on reading comprehension, an overview of Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective on interaction that provides the framework for this study, the problem statement, research questions, the significance and limitations of the study and operational definitions.

Background of the Study

The role of English around the world as the lingua franca for economic and scientific exchange has grown over the past few decades. As mentioned by Warschauer (2000), this is attributed to the advancements made in information technology and the advent of the so-called borderless global economy. Communication between people has been increasingly affected and it has expanded way beyond their own local contexts. In Malaysia, this fact was stressed by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (2003), the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, when he mentioned the need to master the English language to enable the nation to become a global player in the international arena. The effort to produce students who are knowledgeable, competent and able to communicate in English is reflected in the national curriculum where it

