

Language Mastery of Refugee Children in Malaysia Despite Adverse Circumstances

Janet Fernandez¹, Loh Sau Cheong²

¹Faculty of Creative Industries, University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

²Faculty of Education, University Malaya, Malaysia
janfern@gmail.com

Abstract – *Refugee education is a challenge to the Malaysian government, with the ever-rising influx of refugees into the country. Malaysia has policies in place whereby refugee children are not entitled or allowed an education in the government school system. They are encouraged to secure private education. The researcher was appointed as the external examiner for Year Six, the final year of Primary Education, whereby it was noted that a number of students had mastery of languages despite their adverse circumstances as refugee children. Eleven students from the refugee camp were randomly selected on the basis of anonymity. They were interviewed within a secure environment and this data was analysed along with the test answer scripts. The study seeks to explore plausible reasons for their language mastery despite adverse circumstances and offers insights for the findings to be applied within a local context where English is taught as a second language.*

Keywords: *refugee; education; adverse circumstances; mastery; languages*

INTRODUCTION

Refugee education is a challenge to the Malaysian government, with the ever-rising influx of refugees into the country. Malaysia has policies in place whereby refugee children are not entitled or allowed an education in the government school system. They are encouraged to secure private education. The Non-Government Organization or NGO plays an active role in refugee education in collaboration with churches that are willing to provide venues, man-power, books, materials and food on a school calendar timetable. Some children aged above sixteen attend school during the day and are employed to do menial work in the evenings.

This study focuses on the mastery of English by eleven students selected randomly based on the UPSR test results. In some instances, Malay, which is the national language and the lingua franca will be referred to for comparison and clarity of concepts. The UPSR is the Final Year Six examination upon completion of Primary Years in Malaysia. The same test paper was given to the students in this study after it was carried out nationwide by the government schools. The researcher had appointed the external examiner and had taken note that the students had mastered to a certain extent the Malay language and English despite adverse circumstances. The students or subjects came from various nations such as Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with a mixture of male and female students aged twelve. A total of eleven students participated in the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the sudden influx of worldwide rise in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers suggests the need to examine the practices of institutions, in this case, UNCR committed with the task with the task of their resettlement in host countries. In this study, the role of the educational institution is explored. Forced migration and its links with the overall society is a phenomenon that cannot escape the social stigma of an uneducated and lost civilization of refugee children. An exploration of the educational challenges inhibiting refugee children and their mastery of languages despite adversity will be explored in this study. The Malaysian education system does not allow the incorporation of inclusive education for refugee children into the mainstream policy. However, with the diligence of the local churches and NGO, private education within a safe environment is offered to the respondents of this study.

The framework comprises the prominent theory of wellbeing embodied in the discipline of positive psychology developed by Dr Martin Seligman (2011), where there are five pillars underpinning our

psychological wellbeing and happiness – positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, known as PERMA. The subjects, i.e. the teachers may improve their health, happiness and satisfaction with life by focusing on some of these aspects of their lives. The training includes the aspects in Dr Martin Seligman's theory known as the five pillars of wellbeing known as PERMA. As follows is the detailed explanation of PERMA:

Positive emotion: The ability to embrace life with optimism, which doesn't mean no ups and downs but an overall ability to bounce back and view life positively, enjoying a full range of positive emotions including joy, enjoyment and gratitude.

Engagement: Being involved in activities, often the ones that we love doing or those that utilize our strengths, that transport us and absorb us makes for a deeper more interesting life.

Relationships: Our connections to other people – partner, friends, family, boss, colleagues, children and/or community – help buoy us and give us a sense of being loved and secure.

Meaning: Feeling that what we do or what we are working towards matters, not just to us but to others and in the wider scheme of things, gives meaning to our lives.

Accomplishment: Being able to set and achieve goals and enjoy some mastery and control over our lives has shown to help us derive a sense of purpose in life.

Refugee Education Scene on a Global Scale

According to the international law, a refugee child is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which combines the definition of refugee in the 1951 Conventional Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR) with the meaning of a child in Article 1 of the United Nations Conventions on The Rights. These refugee children are below the age of 18 years old and described as "...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted either because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, political opinion, are outside the country of nationality or former habitual residence and are unable to or unwilling to avail themselves to the protection of the country of nationality or unable to or unwilling to return to his country of residence" (Arshad, 2004, p. 105). However, in Malaysia, the refugee children are refugees who left their countries of origin due to grounds not listed in the CRSR such as natural disasters and generalized violence.

According to UNHCR (2014), 86% of the world's refugees live in host countries that neighbor their conflict-affected counties of origin. Statistics show that by mid-2016, 1.5 million Afghan refugees lived in Pakistan and about 1 million in Iran, 2.7 million Syrian refugees lived in Turkey and 1 million in Lebanon, and 0.4 million Somali refugees lived in Kenya and 250, 000 in Ethiopia (UNHRC, 2016). Most of the time, there are great differences in education for refugees in distant resettlement countries compared to neighboring host countries. This is mainly because the numbers of refugees are relatively small and permanence – in terms of settlement and citizenship is presumed, by both countries' government and refugees. Nunn, Caitlin, Celia McMichael, Sandra M. Gifford, & Correa-Velez. (2014) state that in the United States or Canada, those individual refugees who are resettled to or granted refugee status, they are given a pathway to citizenship unavailable to the vast majority of refugees globally. These refugees are considered as noncitizens and government enforcement, their status continues to be unable to activate their citizenship rights. This includes their rights to work and being able to utilize their education to participate in society. Citizenship is defined as a means of realizing rights and creating spaces of legitimacy, access to resources, and belonging (Hovil, 2016). Unfortunately, the refugees do not have all these rights in neighboring host countries.

Various previous studies by Vasudevan (2007), Wain (1982), Kassim (2009) and Idris (2012) have addressed diverse phenomena among the refugees. Among them are the treatments of refugees by the Malaysian authorities with no attention to refugee children, the reason why Asian countries including Malaysia reuse to ratify the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugee and also refugee issue from the social and political perspective, etc. However, there is not proper documentation regarding the refugees' children's academic achievement.

Although UNHCR attempted to highlight the educational needs of refugees via creating awareness among the Ministry of Education staff, many of their needs are still not adequately addressed. In conjunction with this effort, MoE has collaborated with the UNHCR in selecting Malaysian textbooks for refugee schools, made opportunity available for some limited training, and participated in UNHCR education planning meetings 2012-2013 (UNHCR, 2012). Besides, coordination with UNICEF has also asked to look into a human rights advocate with a focus narrowly on "children in emergencies" but on "children in need" (Jones, 2006, p. 600). UNICEF emphasizes education in their framework as their priority. Thus, it is a great need to secure education in any crisis situation, especially among the refugees.

Some 1.75 million refugee children are not in primary school and 1.95 million refugee adolescents are not in secondary school, the report found. Refugees are five times more likely to be out of school than the global average. "This represents a crisis for millions of refugee children," and "Refugee education is sorely neglected when it is one of the few opportunities we have to transform and build the next generation so they can change the fortunes of the tens of millions of forcibly displaced people globally." Grandi (2017, p.10).

There are many reasons why it is necessary to give higher priority to education in asylum policy. One of the important reasons is to minimize the number of times that refugees have to migrate. "One common and crucial motivation is their search for a secure livelihood. Measures that aim to allow asylum seekers in, while restricting the entry of economic migrants, overlook the reasons why a particular person migrates, and are likely to increase irregular migration still further as migrants seek an alternative – and often more dangerous – ways to reach European countries." (Dearden, 2016, p.11)

Language Mastery: An Essential Tool

One of the crucial elements in securing good education among the refugees is mastery of language. This is done by enriching someone's vocabulary as it is the knowledge area in language and it plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language (Cameron, 2001). According to Harmon, Wood, & Keser (2009) as well as Linse & Nunan (2005), learners' vocabulary development is an important aspect of their language development. Recently, more attention has been given to vocabulary as part of the language mastery (Cater and Mc Carthy, 1988; Schmitt, 2000). Schmitt (2000) also has emphasized that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of second language" p. 55.

Vocabulary knowledge and language use complements each other as knowledge of vocabulary enable language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001). In addition, in order to express themselves in any language, people need to use words. According to Maximo (2000), a vocabulary is the essential element for mastery of language as the second language acquirers have regularly reported that the lack of vocabulary is, of course, is the foremost problem. Thus, a good communication complements the importance of vocabulary acquisition.

Students need to learn as many words as possible as well as need to remember them in order to have a rich vocabulary. According to Huckin, Haynes, & Coady (1995), second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the greatest impediment for second language readers to overcome. Vocabulary is the most sizeable and unmanageable aspects of learning and mastery of any language, especially one's mother tongue or foreign language as they have tens thousands of different meaning (Oxford, 1990). In brief, enrich somebody's vocabulary is the route map for mastery of language.

Adversity and Language Mastery

According to Narra-Tumma & Claidius (2013), the student who study a foreign language abroad, experience more adversities than their domestic peers. The challenges that the students face when they are studying abroad is a holistic experience with a variety of potential benefits including linguistic, cultural, personal, professional, and intercultural (Benson, Barkhuizen, & Bodycott, 2013). Therefore, to succeed and maintain their well-being, foreign-language learners must be resilient, able to cope with various tension and stress too.

According to Caruana (2014), a way to overcome challenges as well as achieving personal outcomes of language proficiency is by forming and projecting a new second-language identity. Norton (2014) states that "language learners who struggle to speak from one identity position . . . may be able to . . . claim alternative identities from which to speak, listen, read, or write. If learners are successful in their bids for more powerful identities, their language acquisition may be enhanced" (p. 74). Norton concludes from Davies and Harré (1990) positioning theory (Norton, 2014, p. 77-78), which states that the discursive practices in which the individual participates continually provide him/her with "subject positions" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46) through which his/her identity is formed. Besides, Kramsch (2009) has put it, "a symbolic multilingual environment, where alternative realities can be explored and reflected upon" (p. 210), a space inviting and incorporating the expression of the student's manifold identity-positions. Students have different identities and despite these, they can still perform because of the teachers' positive involvements.

There are many ways in which classroom teaching can successfully achieve this, both in terms of the encouragement of teachers' sensitivity to their students' complex identities and in the development of engaging learning materials responding to and enabling their expression (Dörnyei, 2009; Ibrahim, 1999; Kramsch, 2009; Phipps, 2010; Ros i Solé & Fenoulhet, 2013; Ushioda, 2011; Wilson, 2013). Such teaching could promote students intellectually, emotionally and socially, both inside and outside the classroom, for teaching, motivation, and self-confidence, it can also be a tremendous force for the good especially in language learning (Dörnyei, 2014). In short, motivation is the key to language learning despite any adversity.

The Push Factor Despite Adversity

In the process of learning language, motivation plays a significant role (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Language teachers must understand the relationship between motivation and its effect on language acquisition in order to teach a language effectively (Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001). The passion which related to a person's intrinsic goals and desires are the core motivations in learners' success (Zhu, 2006). According to Zhu (2006), they know their preferences, their strengths and weakness as well as effectively utilize their strengths and compensate for weaknesses as successful learners. According to Ryan & Deci (2000), there is a positive relationship between successful language learning and learner's passion. Thus, the teachers should find ways to link to this passion.

It is deniable that adverse circumstances may prove to push learners to succeed, as the teachers use motivational teaching strategies (Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1997). These motivational teaching strategies can penetrate easily as it increases language learners' motivation levels (Pressley, El-Dinary, Marks, Brown, & Stein, 1992). According to Juvonen (2006) only with sufficient motivation, any individual with any abilities neither remarkable nor ordinary can achieve their long-term goals. The teachers are the most imperative factor in influencing their students' motivation as well as the student's adverse circumstances that push them for success in the language acquisition process (Hidi, & Renninger, 2006). There are various ways a student learns. Majority of them learn by doing, making, writing, designing, creating, and solving (Chen, & Jang, 2010). According to Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge (2005,) students' motivation and curiosity are decreased by passivity. On the other hand, according to Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs (2003) students' enthusiasm, involvement, and willingness to participate affect the quality of class discussion as an opportunity for learning. Baumeister et al., (2005) claim that small-groups and pair work boost students' self-confidence and are excellent sources of motivation in which the students are the push in the most adverse situation for success.

In order to express their ideas and feelings on a topic, group work as a team is the best method (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). This is mainly because it is easier for the students to communicate in a smaller group rather than to the entire classroom. They can also able to work cooperatively, which increases class cohesion and thus motivation (Garrison, 1992) These are the factors that allow students to work in any adverse circumstance which in turn bring them to the highest success.

Table 1
Scores Obtained for English and Malay

RESPONDENTS	MARKS: ENGLISH	MARKS: MALAY
FEMALE,A	83%	83%
MALE,B	90%	48.3%
MALE, C	88.75%	70%
FEMALE, D	88.75%	50%
MALE, E	86.25%	48.3%
FEMALE, F	83.75%	56.6%
FEMALE, G	83.75%	51.6%
MALE, H	83.75%	46.6%
FEMALE, I	81.25%	30.0%
MALE, J	77.5%	31.6%
MALE, K	72.5%	28.3%

Based on the data above, it is evident that the respondents have fared better in English than in Bahasa Melayu or Malay. As for Bahasa Melayu or Malay, 50% of the respondents failed the paper, scoring below 50%. Only two respondents had almost equal scores in both English and Malay. There seems to be a disparage in the mastery of English and Malay on an equal platform of competency.

The highest score for English was 90% and the lowest 72.5%. The highest score for Bahasa Melayu /Malay was 83% and the lowest 28.3%. In comparison, the respondents generally fared better in English than Malay.

In the study, the paper will focus on English for reasons of clarity and objectivity. On a peripheral note, with twenty over years of teaching government school children who were formally taught English as a second language for a period of five to seven years, it was noted that the errors made by the refugee children were not very different. Although the refugee children were not given the opportunity to be schooled in a structured government type environment, they performed somewhat similar. The common errors noted were Subject – Verb Agreement, lexical misappropriation, spelling mistakes, L1 or mother tongue interference, error of omission, tenses, comma-splice and pseudo-words.

Material

The UNHCR centre in this study cooperated in the study based on a trust-based relationship with the researcher. Test marks were not disclosed to the respondents, they were only given grades. For the purpose of the study, marks were required to draw parallels, comparisons and contrasts. All test papers were returned to the centre upon marking them.

Test papers were marked and the marks and contents were taken for the study to measure their success in the mastery of English in particular. Short and non-invasive questions were posed to the respondents in the centre in the presence of their teachers and care takers. These were then analysed by the researcher.

METHODS

After the data collection, interviews with the students, thereafter referred to as respondents were conducted within the centre. Demographics were collected but not reported due to the sensitivity and to avoid biasness in reporting. The names of the respondents were not revealed as per research ethics stipulated. Sample test questions were thoroughly analysed by the researchers with focus intend to reflect and validate language mastery among the respondents despite adverse circumstances.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The following are the findings of the study:

The Direct Translation Method: A sign of mastery of languages

There appears to be strong indication that respondents used the direct translation method when writing an essay in examination. This is because there is tremendous distinction between crafting a speech or writing an essay. The direct translation method tends to come easy for local students. However, the respondents being refugees and non-locals, showed their mastery of two languages they acquired when they attempted the test questions. Respondents may have thought that it was just a matter of replacing each word with the corresponding translated word, and then you could be comprehended. However, this analogy is not entirely wrong. This is because translation is much more complicated than what the respondents are given credit. There can be numerous methods for saying a similar thing in another language. When respondents are writing an essay, there are various aspects that they need to consider such as syntax, grammar, colloquialisms, and any other number of examples of linguistic nuances. These mistakes somehow reflected their mastery of two languages, English and Malay.

Grammatical Errors: the ability to use some grammar is an added advantage

Strong grammatical skills go a long way in writing good essays. Those who do not have a strong base of grammatical skills will face difficulties in writing an impressive essay. According to the finding, the most common grammatical errors by the respondents were identified. For example, the respondents created sentences that combined two or more complete thoughts without the use of proper punctuation between clauses. Furthermore, sometimes there lacked subject-verb agreement in the sentences. The ideas were present but the manner of presentation marred the performance. Again, it was noted that the respondents had mastered the art of explicit communication minus the grammatical and lexical correctness.

Schemata: an experience within limited confines

It is unfortunate that the respondents were unable to express themselves outside their confines. The limited schemata is attributed to the lack of experience that other fellow local students may have. However, sufficient discussion was noted in their essays. Two or more respondents were able to relate unfortunate incidents quite effectively.

Forced response: an attempt to succeed

Despite their limitations, all the respondents made a positive attempt to answer all the questions in all the sections of the examination. Although the answers were not perfect, the respondents' attempt indicated their desire to succeed, somewhat in the hope of being awarded marks if an answer was displayed. It displayed their healthy respect towards the mastery of language in the form of a written response coupled with the desire to succeed to perhaps pass the paper.

Paraphrasing: a means to make meaningful statements

Paraphrasing is an important technique that is effectively to convey ideas. Paraphrasing knowledge is required when you have to summarise a detailed and long passage so that it can be easily understood by the target audience. It was interesting to note that respondents who scored high marks in examination were those who applied the paraphrasing techniques in answering the questions given. Respondents who exhibited good paraphrasing skills were inevitably graded higher than those who did not.

Plausible Reasons for Language Mastery Despite Adversity

The following section discusses possible and plausible reasons for the respondents' success in this study:

Motivations to study and future plans

According to an interview, the respondents were asked about their motivations for wanting to take up education and training, all of the interviewees said it was in order to gain employment; some had specific career paths in mind. For example, four of the respondents had a short-term goal which was to go on to university, four of them talked about going into teaching. While only two interviewees indicated that their motivation to study was purely to learn English. This may be because they considered that they had moved on as they could now speak good English. However, as many in the sample had participated in short term courses in the past, this must have been a motivation for them at some point. According to research, making friends, fitting in to their new communities, and to gain a qualification are also included as the reasons for them to have motivations to study. Finally, one of the learners spoke of her determination to succeed so that if she were granted refugee status and permission to stay, she would be have the power to continue with her education at some point in time.

Key to survival

In a system designed to push refugees to economic self-sufficiency within three to six months of their arrival, developing language skills is critical to survival, say experts, who work closely with refugee communities.

Understand more about their new country

A learner said "I cannot understand my neighbours or people I meet." If you are in a country and you can understand the language, you can integrate easily and get to know people. So, refugees are more likely to learn the language of the country in order to understand more about their new country. In this case, English and Malay were the options. (Rachel, 2005)

To be accepted into their communities

"Learning language is essential to end loneliness, and enable refugees to rebuild their lives through work, volunteering and socialising with their neighbours." says Stephen Hale, the chief executive of Refugee Action. Due to the citizens will look down to refugees, "so the refugees will try their best to learn English to communicate with them in order to be accepted into their communities." (Rachel, 2005)

Effort by The Refugee Centre

Volunteer teachers and retired teachers are a factor to consider in the success of students being able to master English despite adversity. A conducive environment could be an added factor too. Although the centre was not a posh venue, basic amenities such as classrooms, fans, lightings, refreshments may be an added advantage.

Summary of findings

The errors and mistakes made by the refugee children indicate that they have mastery of English at an acceptable level within the local context. Although they did not attend structured classes like other children in the government schools, they were able to master the language despite adverse circumstances. One of the salient factors may be the mode of general communication used during the course of the school day by the instructors. English is used to communicate at all times during school hours. This made an impact on the mastery of the language despite adversity.

Limitations of the study

The sample is not adequate to make a generalization of the entire refugee education scenario in Malaysia. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized. The study was conducted in one of the largest of the thirty odd centers in the nation. The centre where the study was conducted was a suburb where English was widely used.

Delimitations:

The purpose of the study is to show that refugee children have the capacity to master languages despite adversity. Despite the disadvantages of not being able to attend government schools and mingle with a multi-cultural Malaysian society, the refugee children seemed to have fared beyond

expectations. The same principles of mastery despite adversity may be used to motivate local national type schools where English is taught minimal hours to students who study Mandarin and Tamil as their main languages.

CONCLUSION

Learners who are placed in difficult or adverse positions are capable of language mastery if they are given positive input by adults and caregivers. Examinations results alone do not report mastery of languages. Analysis of examination papers may indicate students have mastery of languages by looking into the way students write, their errors and what these errors actually convey. The implication is that positive psychology and the wide use of English may not be conducive to be implemented on a large scale due to time and workload constraints in the local arena. Hence, the discussion and findings of this study offer an insight of actual and true mastery of languages despite adverse circumstances. The success largely lays on the daily use of English, commitment of the teaching force and a positive and safe environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported and funded by Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia, under UTAR Research Fund. We thank our colleagues, the UNHCR El Shaddai Refugee Centre, Malaysia, our Research Assistances and participants who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research which is described as groundbreaking and a noble work by IPSR, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia. Many thanks to Professor Dr. Loh Sau Cheong of Universiti Malaya who supervised the study and research.

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