

**EMPOWERING CHILDREN THROUGH CIRCLE TIME:
AN INTERVENTION TO PROMOTE LANGUAGE
INTERACTION IN PRIMARY ESL CLASSROOM
IN MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

As Malaysian English curriculum changes in accordance to the needs and demands of education all across the world, so must the teaching of English as the second language (L2) in Malaysian schools. Every year there are many approaches and innovations introduced to the community of educators to cater to these changes and amongst many is the use of Circle Time. This paper investigates the use of Circle Time in supporting ESL pupils' language interactions in classroom by looking at the types and frequencies of language interactions that occur during lessons. This is to determine if Circle Time is indeed beneficial in supporting second language interaction in the classroom. Classroom observations were conducted on two classes of Year Three which utilized Circle Time. Besides the frequency, the kind of interactions that occurred during Circle Time were also observed using an observation checklist. Lastly, two English teachers were interviewed to find out their perspectives on the implementation. Findings of this study showed that there were trends in the frequency of seven of the types of language interaction that occurred during Circle Time. Besides, the interviewed teachers identified two advantages of Circle Time on their pupils' interactions and to sum up, Circle Time is a suitable intervention strategy to promote language interactions of English as a Second Language among Malaysian primary schools.

Keywords: *circle time, language interaction, second language, primary school*

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2003, changes have been made to reform the Malaysian education system in tandem with the 21st century learning pedagogy. Such initiatives were the Revised Primary and Secondary School Standard Curriculum, the Education Blueprint and the English Language Roadmap by the Ministry of Education. Simultaneously, as the English curriculum is being revamped, so must the teaching approaches of English as the Second Language in Malaysian schools. One of the mentioned suggested approaches includes the use of Circle Time which targets to promote confident young L2 learners in Malaysia.

Circle Time is a teaching strategy used by early childhood educators in preschools which involves children sitting in a circle around the teacher (Mosley, 1996; Stuckey, 2017). Circle time has been a typical vital teaching component in the Western education used at different levels, ranging from nursery school to higher education. In Malaysia, the same concept of Circle Time can be found in National Education System in the Standard National Preschool Curriculum (KSPK). Circle Time was adopted and used as **perbualan awal** or Morning Talk, a routine activity in preschool education. In the West, Circle Time sessions often take place during the first part of the day and function as a warm-up activity for the day (Stuckey, 2017). During the sessions, children talk about their personal activities, sing songs, review previous activities, revising knowledge content, play instruments and games as well-read storybooks. Such activities are devised often to support the children in developing self-esteem and gearing them towards taking responsibility of their own.

One of the issues in Malaysian English is the lack of opportunity to use English meaningfully in primary school settings (Yaacob, 2006; Yaacob & Pinter, 2008). These studies have indicated that classroom interaction was very much teacher-centred and students were not provided with opportunities to interact meaningfully in the language classrooms. This happens because the teachers were concerned that pupils do not have the knowledge and the ability to speak in English. Therefore, they deprive the pupils from providing and supporting meaningful opportunities and activities for them to try to speak or communicate in English in the classroom.

Despite being widely used globally, Circle Time or sometimes known as Talking Circle worldwide, is not a common practice in Malaysian schools. In Malaysia, the concept of Circle Time can only be found in the Standard National Preschool Curriculum (KSPK) within the national education system. It adopted circle time concept, but call it **Perbualan Awal** or Morning Talk, a routine activity in preschool education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). The talking session is thematic in nature with suggested topics to be incorporated during the class discussion and normally lasts from 20 to 30 minutes per session. The frequency of Morning Talk during school hours is flexible and based on the teachers as well as on the needs of the learning environment.

However, apart from preschool education, Circle Time is not a familiar practice in either Malaysian primary or secondary education. As mentioned earlier, it has been supported by many that Circle Time is a useful strategy because it can help develop pupils social skills, improve self-esteem and can address the need of pupils with behavioural difficulties (Canney & Bryne, 2006; Lown, 2002). Circle Time can also help pupils to cooperate with one another and leads to improvements in pupils speaking and listening skills (Housego & Burns, 1994). Some have also claimed that this strategy has been effective for group work in the classroom by encouraging pupils to extend their social network and foster relationship (Lown, 2002). Thus, this study is an attempt to use of Circle Time as an intervention to promote language interactions among the pupils in second language classrooms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper attempts to explore how Circle Time could be used to support language interaction in an ESL classroom by imposing the following questions:

- 1a. What are the types of language interaction that pupils produce during Circle Time?
- 1b. What are the frequencies of language interactions that happen during Circle Time?
1. Does Circle Time increase pupils' interaction in English classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Circle Time is a child-friendly approach that is underpinned by the social-emotional ideologies. This classroom technique is used to support children to understand and express themselves, to promote self-esteem and to develop interpersonal relationship (Mosley, 1996). Activities during Circle Time aim at developing pupils' awareness of themselves as well as others, promoting listening skills and positive interpersonal behaviour. According to Collins and Cavanagh (2015), Circle Time is a form of group facilitation where pupils sit in a circular formation to discuss, communicate and interact. It reflects Vygotsky's constructivist theory of learning where children learn from their surrounding inclusive and supportive environment. Wu and Lang (2011) summarise one basic principle of circle time is that all participants are equal and each contribution to the session are highly valued.

The practice of using Circle Time has been around in education field for a while as it has been named differently in different parts of the world. The activity requires all pupils to sit in a circle with the teacher which allows all individuals to be able to face everyone. Teachers then incorporate simple to complex activities based on the ability levels of the pupils such as review of lessons, enjoy rhymes and songs, read storybooks and even participating in movement games. According to Bechtel (2004) and Winterman & Sapona, (2002) (as cited in Bruce, S., Fasy, C., Gulick, J., Jones, J., & Pike, E. (2006)), the primary purpose of Circle Time or morning circle is for the children to develop a sense of emotional safety in establishing classroom community, coupled with individual opportunities for successful participation, support children to develop a sense of security in the classroom. Krull (2017) further describes Circle Time as a special time to share and rhymes, play instruments, read story, participate in games and relaxation activities. He summarises Circle Time as any time that a group of children are together for an activity and recommends two circle time sessions per day; one at the beginning of the day and the other at the end of the day.

Considering its benefit in the context of social work, Talking Circle had gained popularity, being adapted as a teaching strategy to help

learners explore ethnic diversity at different stages in America. A study by Jennings and her colleagues (2015) on the use of talking circle in exploring ethnic diversity was conducted on learners of a Californian university. Through learners' reflection, the strategy was found to be effective in giving learners a chance to teach and learn about each other's ethnic heritage and struggles by sharing of personal stories, experiences and challenges in the circle. Obie (2016) in his study on the integration of modified talking circles finds that these activities are helpful to the Tribal (natives) and Western (other Americans) in providing intervention and prevention programs in the areas of health, recovery, mental health, justice and other social service settings.

Despite most of these studies are based on L1 context, Circle Time sessions have proved to be advantageous in supporting learners' social and emotional development in the EFL context. A study by Wu and Lang (2011) on the introduction of circle time in a Chinese middle school found that the sessions run as effectively and productively as they had been able to with a class in an English school who experience circle time regularly. Some of these have been most beneficial in the development of the second language.

Corresponding to the idea of talking circle as well, Winters (2017) also adopted the talking circle into Circle Process Strategy, in which the objectives are building trust and relationship among his secondary learners. As the process was used in managing his homeroom, the four-step process was used to make decisions regarding class policies and procedures, materials to cover, learning goals, the course calendar, grading rubric and evaluation. As the influence of talking circle grew as part of the socialistic constructivist approach, the strategy is expended into circle time, aiming at developing socio-emotional intelligence of young learners. Later on, due to early work of passionate few such as Mosley (1996), circle time was introduced into preschool and primary school settings.

Now a commonly used approach in the United States (Bruce et al, 2006), in the UK (Collins, 2011), and Ireland (Collins & Kavanagh, 2013), Circle Time is intended for young learners to develop listening skills and attention spans, promote oral communication, and teach new concepts and skills as well as to have fun (Krull, 2017). Tew

(1998, as cited in Glazzard, 2016) concludes that circle time creates an emotionally safe place for pupils to explore what they think and feel. However, Circle Time is not well-known nor a well-practiced approach in Malaysia despite being highly regarded globally in the education field as one of the effective strategies to develop self-esteem in learning. Based on previous studies done on Circle Time, there were limited studies that involved second language learners as their participants. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the use of circle time in second language learning and its benefits for L2 learners as it did to learners of the first language.

In understanding the relationship with between circle time and self-esteem, this study will next look at two models of quality Circle Time.

Models of Quality Circle Time

Mosley's Model (1990)

In 1990s, Jenny Mosley adopted Native American's Talking Circle into Circle Time which is suitable for educational setting of young learners. The Mosley Model of circle time is designed to promote positive behaviour, enhanced listening and communication systems, calm lunchtimes, energetic and fun playtimes, good mental health and wellbeing among young learners. Currently, two variations of circle time by Mosley are the Quality Circle Time - QCT (Mosley 1996 and 1998) and the smaller circle of supports (Mosley, 2016). QCT refers to a whole range of classroom strategies that affect pupils' self-esteem and positive behaviour. It follows a carefully structured Five-Step model in a regular weekly basis that builds around five skills of listening, speaking, looking, thinking and concentrating. Meanwhile the smaller circles of supports provide extra help for children with additional emotional or behavioural needs (Mosley and Niwano, 2007). Circles of support are a smaller, short-term, carefully planned and specifically structured to function as an intervention for small groups of children with behavioural difficulties and to adhere to agreed behavioural guidelines. Every circle time session includes activities that encourage the development of the five skills. This means that circle time offers pupils both academic as well as social and emotional development benefits (Mosley, 2006).

Winter's (2017) Talking Circle Processes

Winter's Talking Circle Processes cater to learners with higher cognitive ability which is more suited for upper primary or secondary level learners. It is used for discussion, problem solving and decision making. The role of the circle is to provide a safe place for connection and dialogues through taking the time to share stories, build relationships, explore values, and create guidelines so that participation helps everyone feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe in the circle and creates a foundation for courageous acts of sharing (Winters, 2017: 1).

There are four parts in the Winter's Circle Processes: *Building Connections*, *Piercing The Surface*, *Delving Deeper* and *Reflecting and Learning*. Firstly, in *Building Connections*, ice-breaking activities are used to start the process of establishing connections to one another and mentally and emotionally focused on the discussions. Next, *Piercing the Surface* is where teachers facilitate a stronger connection to the topic by asking learners to define it or talk about it. *Delving Deeper* allows learners to find connections with each other by revealing vulnerabilities and opens up space for growth and change and in the last part, the circle provides time for learners to reflect on the ideas and their own contributions and others.

Types of Language Interaction

There are two categories of language interaction; namely social and academic. Social language is the language of everyday communication either oral or written forms whereas academic language is the language necessary for success in learning that is related to curriculum. Preschools and schools are the first educational setting place where children received formal education and exposure to social experiences. As the formation of language skills varies according to the variety of activities they interact in, a child with better capabilities is readier to develop more complex skills such as problem solving and analysing abilities (Siti Noor Fauziah & Nik Suryani, 2014).

Collier (2016) through her Classroom Language Interaction Checklist (CLIC) identifies 55 language interactions; 15 types of social language

interaction and 40 types of academic language interaction. Her list on the types of language interaction is used as the main reference of classroom observation checklist used in this study as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

Types of Language Interactions (Collier, 2016)

| SOCIAL LANGUAGE INTERACTION | ACADEMIC LANGUAGE INTERACTION |
|--|--|
| 1. Follow general directions | 1. Follows specific directions for academic task |
| 2. Acts out common school activities | 2. Follow along during oral reading |
| 3. Points, draws or gesture responses | 3. Understand teacher’s discussion |
| 4. Verbalised key words | 4. Use sounds/symbols association |
| 5. Give commands to peers | 5. Decodes words |
| 6. Exchange common greetings | 6. Generate simple sentences |
| 7. Use limited vocabulary | 7. Complete simple unfinished sentences |
| 8. Describe objects and people | 8. Make some pronunciation and basic grammatical but is understood |
| 9. Retells a familiar story | 9. Asks for clarification during academic tasks |
| 10. Initiates and responds to a conversation | 10. Asks/answer specific questions regarding topic |
| 11. Appears to attend to what is going on | 11. Volunteers to answer questions |
| 12. Appropriately answers basic questions | 12. Responds orally and in written form |
| 13. Participate in sharing time | 13. Can explain simple instructional tasks to peers |
| 14. Narrates a simple story | 14. Adds an appropriate ending after listening to a story |
| 15. At least 10000-word receptive vocabulary | 15. Initiates conversations and questions |
| | 16. Demonstrate an interest in reading |
| | 17. Understand and uses temporal spatial concepts |
| | 18. Distinguish main ideas from supporting details |
| | 19. Use rules of punctuation and capitalization for reading |
| | 20. Engage in and produce connected narrative |

(continued)

| SOCIAL LANGUAGE INTERACTION | ACADEMIC LANGUAGE INTERACTION |
|------------------------------------|--|
| | 21. Can communicate thoughts |
| | 22. Makes complex grammatical errors |
| | 23. Writes from dictation |
| | 24. Understand and uses academic vocabulary appropriately |
| | 25. Reads for comprehension |
| | 26. Can discuss vocabulary |
| | 27. Uses glossary, index and appendix |
| | 28. Uses expanded vocabulary |
| | 29. Functions somewhat on academic level with peers |
| | 30. Maintain two-way conversation |
| | 31. Writes short paragraphs |
| | 32. Writes in cursive |
| | 33. Uses correct punctuation, capitalisation, paragraphing |
| | 34. Demonstrate an interest in writing |
| | 35. Can discuss aspects of language/grammar |
| | 36. Initiates writing activities |
| | 37. Composes and edits over one page papers |
| | 38. Can explain instructional tasks to others |
| | 39. Demonstrate decontextualized comprehension |
| | 40. Uses academically appropriate vocabulary |

Language Interaction in Second Language Classrooms

Many studies have been conducted on learners' interaction and they vary across age and context of discussions. Massey (2004) suggests that preschool teachers involve children in cognitively challenging conversation to foster their language growth. Similarly, Durden and Rainer (2008) supported the idea as their findings concluded that the ways and nature of teacher talk can be a powerful tool in provoking critical thinking. The teacher is the centre point who influences language interaction in the classroom which indirectly creates a comfortable environment for pupils to interact.

In term of second language learning, creating conditions for language learning through classroom interaction depends on the kinds of

communicative environments of the classrooms and on the means of assistance provided by the teachers to encourage the learners to take part in these environments. Hall (2006) found that teachers who are effective in stimulating cognitively and communicatively rich participation and follow up on learner responses are able to create rich communicative environments upon which learners could draw subsequent contributions in the class. In addition, Consolo (2002 as cited in Hall, 2006) in his study on English language classrooms in Brazil found out that in classrooms with rich communicative environments and ample learners participation, teachers often follow up on learners responses to validate learners contributions and help create topical connections among them.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed method approach to provide a clear picture of what was happening during circle time sessions.

Structured Classroom Observation

The researcher observed 2 sets of three Circle Time sessions in two separate Year Three classes, amounted to six observations ranged from 7 to 23 minutes based on the objectives of the circle time session. A checklist was used to record the frequency of language interaction occurred based on the types, labelled as Classroom Participation Observation Checklist. The checklist consists of two parts: Lesson details and Types of Language Interaction on Collier's (2016) Classroom Language Interaction Checklist (CLIC) Third Edition which consisted of 15 social and 55 academic language interactions. For two weeks, they observed three types of suggested activities during circle time such as BINGO Sounds and My Ice-Cream List. Each session took a maximum of 25 minutes from the total of 60-minutes English lesson. The teachers observed the implementation of circle time in their respective classes as well as reviewing the benefits of circle time based on previous studies in empowering pupils to use English. At the end of co-teaching sessions, the first leg of interviews was carried out to find out the teachers' initial opinion on Circle Time.

Semi-structured Interview

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two teachers who were using Circle Time with the Year Three classes. The interviews were conducted twice on each teacher; at end of the co-teaching sessions and at end of the observations. The use of pre-set questions which were adapted from Collins (2011) provided a focus regarding the circle time activity but additional questions were included to probe into the circle time's objectives and the teachers' interpretation of pupils participation during the sessions.

The last part of data collection was another semi-structured interview with the teachers by the end of the third observation. The use of pre-set questions provided a focus regarding the circle time activity but additional questions were integrated in order to look at the teacher's particular responses and their interpretation of pupils' participation.

The interview data for this study was analysed by recurring codes. First, we tabulated the interview responses according to the questions and compared to the teachers' responses. Next, emerging themes on the benefits of Circle Time during English lesson from the teachers' responses were identified. Finally, the recurring codes were compiled and presented.

Profile of the teachers

The two teachers involved in this study were not the main participants observed in the data collection. However, they were essentials in providing necessary information regarding the circle time sessions in order to understand the types of language interaction produced by the pupils during circle time sessions. The teachers involved in this study were those who were teaching English to both classes and so they were not selected but instead, were assigned to the participants' classes. Luckily, both teachers were willing to explore the new technique of circle time into their English lessons.

As shown in Table 2, both teachers were graduate of English Language related courses and had been teaching English since the beginning of

their careers. Miss F from School A was a novice teacher with four years of teaching experience meanwhile Mrs M was an experienced teaching who has been teaching for eleven years. Moreover, Miss F had gone through a more extensive English Language Teaching course of 6 years compared to Mrs M who went through one-year KPLI course.

Table 2

Demographic information of the English teachers

| Detail | Miss F | Mrs M |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Age | 28 | 37 |
| 2. School | School A | School B |
| 3. Option | Teaching English as Second Language | English Language Study (Primary) |
| 4. English Teaching Experience | 4 years | 11 years |
| 5. Graduates of | IPGM KPM | KPLI IPGM KKB |

Description of Circle Time Sessions

There were six classroom observations conducted on Circle Time for this study. Both teachers went through sessions in order to learn about Circle Time which included three co-teaching. The activities included simply talking, storytelling or doing revision of previous lessons. The teachers were free to design their own activities for the circle time and it was without any interference from the researcher.

The duration of Miss F’s Circle Time was getting shorter as the sessions continued. The objectives of her Circle Time also revolved around revisiting phonics sounds. Unlike Miss F’s circle time, the duration of circle time in Mrs M increased as the session continued. Even though Mrs M’s circle time sessions used similar activities throughout the three observations, the pupils were actively participating during the sessions.

FINDINGS

Types of Language Interaction

To answer the first and second research question, data from the observation checklist, which was the frequency of eleven types of language interaction, was compiled and analysed. A comparison of frequency based on the two categories of language interactions that were observed during circle time; namely Social Language Interaction and Academic Language Interactions was carried out. Out of the 394 language interactions recorded, the findings indicated that 372 (94.42%) interactions were academic language interactions compared to 22 (5.58%) interactions recorded for social language interactions.

Collier (2016) listed 14 social language interactions and 55 academic language interactions. However, only several types of language interaction observed during six sessions of circle time on the two categories. The findings displayed that pupils had been using eleven types of language interaction during three sessions of Circle Time.

Academic Language Interaction

In the classroom observations, the Circle Time recorded seven types of academic language interaction occurred, as opposed to 55 types suggested by Collier (2016). With the frequency of 202 occurrences in Miss F's sessions and 170 in Mrs M's, the academic language interaction transcended the social language (22) interaction by a huge gap. There were seven types of academic language interaction recorded. The highest frequency was noted in Mrs M's class when her pupils volunteered to answer questions (66) and the lowest frequency was when Miss F's pupils asked for clarification (2). Apart from that, interactions by Miss F's pupils were higher than Mrs M in five out of seven types of academic language interaction, compared to the two types in which Mrs M's pupils were more active participants. In one of the most active type which was use sounds/symbol association, there was an almost equal number of interactions during Miss F's and Mrs M's sessions as there were 62 and 58 occurrences recorded during classroom observations. Yet, the biggest gap could be seen in responding to oral stimuli as there were 35 occurrences recorded in Miss F's sessions compared to only nine in Mrs M's.

Volunteering to answer questions

One of the most notable increases could be seen in another type of language interaction which is the pupils' effort to volunteer to answer the teacher's questions. There had been a steady increase during Mrs M's sessions while Miss F's sessions showed a decrease during the second session. During Mrs M's sessions, the frequency of pupils volunteering increased from first session (14) to the second (24) and finally the third (28). Slightly a different scenario for Miss F's sessions, there was a decrease in pupil's participation to her questioning from 17 occurrences in first session to 13 during second session and later, displayed an increase (15) during the last session. In this particular type of interaction, Mrs M class showed a more active participation from the pupils in volunteering to answer their teacher's questions.

Responding orally to stimuli

For the next type of language interaction which was responding orally to stimuli, there was a big difference between Miss F's and Mrs M's class. Pupils responded to stimuli during circle time nine 35 times meanwhile it was only nine times during Mrs M sessions. The second session for both teachers produced the least number (1) of responses to stimuli among three sessions of Circle Time.

Social Language Interaction

In relation to the social language interaction, the observation revealed that there are four types of social language interaction, as opposed to 14 social languages interaction introduced by Collier (2016). The pupils used English to follow general direction, verbalised key words, give command to peers and exchange greetings. Different types of interaction occurred during Miss F's and Mrs M's sessions, in exception to follow general direction. The pupils in Miss F responded to Miss F's general direction nine times throughout the three circle time sessions while it was six times in Mrs M's sessions. Yet Miss F's pupils did not verbalise key words meanwhile it happened twice during Mrs M's sessions. Instead, Miss F's pupils were able to give command to peers and exchange greetings occasionally at three and two times respectively during their circle time. However, none of the two types was observed in Mrs M's class.

To sum up, the findings had provided evidence that language interactions increased and decreased based on the types. The frequency was higher by the third sessions indicated that teachers and pupils were getting comfortable with the practice of circle time during English lessons. Overall, the total number of language interactions during Miss F's circle time was higher than during Mrs M's sessions. Miss F's first (66) and third (101) sessions were respectively 26 and 30 times more active than Mrs M's (40 and 71). However, Mrs M's second session (67) outdone Miss F's (49) by 18. In order to deepen our understanding on increase and decrease of language interactions, the next part will look at the teachers view on circle time based on their experience implementing the strategy in their class.

THE BENEFIT OF CIRCLE TIME IN MALAYSIAN ESL CLASSROOM

In the second interview, both teachers mentioned that they chose the above objectives so as to provide the pupils with opportunities of revising phonics. Mrs M stated in her second interview, that “... *is to help them recall phonics. They are struggling to blend phonics*”. The lessons were almost identical in term of contents but differ slightly on the teaching strategies used. Miss F designed game-based activities as well as pair work meanwhile Mrs M's activities were more traditionally teacher-centred. Mrs M believed that her pupils were struggling with reading in L2. She thought that her pupils did not possess necessary vocabulary to use English in the class. Her justification for the objectives was similar to the Miss F's which was also instigated by the pupils' struggle with blending words. However, the activities for Mrs M were repetitive over the three sessions and change was made only on the content of the session. Her doubt that her pupils had not acquired the sounds given was her reason for her designed of the activities.

Increased concentration

Both teachers agreed that circle time had improved their pupils' concentration towards the lesson. Since the pupils were sitting on the floor circling the teacher, they had better view of the whiteboard

and stimuli used by the teacher. The teachers also believed that Circle Time helped to reduce the gap between teacher and pupils by being closer to them (Miss F, second interview). According to her, the pupils' concentration can be seen from the number of times they asked Miss F to repeat her questions. She believed the frequency reduced from the first to the third session as by the third, the pupils took their time to listen to her first before working on their spelling of the assigned word.

Similarly, Mrs M mentioned that her pupils had shown better concentration because Circle Time provided the opportunity to sit together. Even though the pupils were rather excited during the first session and Mrs M had a little trouble getting her pupils to focus on the activity, she believed her class control improved a little during the second session. She was able to come up with ways to manage her class well by the third session. In her third session, the pupils were required to fill in the missing sounds in the word to form recognizable words. Mrs M recalled that she managed to keep her pupils in check even though the pupils were actively volunteering to use the sound cards they have in their possession to complete the missing sounds. Thus, she was happy to experience an increased in classroom participation during her sessions.

Apart from that, Miss F also mentioned that Circle Time helped teachers to focus on passive pupils. By having them together in one location, she found that she had all her pupils within her line of sight. Therefore, it was easier for her to identify those who preferred to remain quiet among the proactive ones. She then nominated these pupils so that they would not be missed out in participating in the class activity. Truly enough, her pupils showed some effort to answer her questions and some managed to provide correct answers.

Among the four types of language interaction, pupils were most active in using phonic sounds during the circle time in both classes. As Miss F believed that Circle Time had increased her pupils' concentration, she also indicated that learners' performance in basic reading has improved significantly. Her Circle Time sessions were getting shorter towards the end of the third session, signifying an improvement in the pupils' reading ability. She noted that her pupils are able to read with minimal guidance, as quoted from her interview.

“... increased their concentration. They paid attention better. They like to shout out the answers even though I called for someone else.” (Miss F)

Another statement by Miss F was when she mentioned about nominating the passive pupils to answer. She mentioned that her passive ones were also able to provide the class with the correct answers to her questions.

“I can focus on passive pupils. The quiet ones do not like to raise their hands. They always stay quiet. So if I called their names, they will answer, at least they think and try to answer. Some did try to answer and got correct answers.” (Miss F)

Voluntary contribution

During Mrs M’s sessions, the frequency of pupils volunteering increased from first session to the second and finally the highest during the third. Slightly different for Miss F’s sessions, there was a decrease in pupil’s participation to her questioning from the first session to the second and later, displayed an increase during the last session. In term of this particular type of interaction, Mrs M class showed a more active participation from the pupils in volunteering to answer their teacher’s questions.

Throughout the circle time sessions, Miss F and Mrs M took note of several initiatives made by their pupils during circle time sessions. Miss F recalled her pupils helping out their classmates during the third session to spell words with –ay sound. In her second interview, Miss F was excited to see;

“pupils also helped each other during lessons. They can’t wait to answer for their friends too”. (Miss F)

Likewise, Mrs M also experienced pupils’ willingness to contribute through their efforts to speak out during the third session. She believed that Circle Time encouraged her pupils to be active participants such as trying to fill the missing sounds with the correct letter cards. All these occurrences were voluntary actions by the pupils as observed during

the classroom observations. Therefore, both teachers are pleased with the level of participation made by their pupils throughout the sessions.

DISCUSSION

The findings identified four social and seven academic language interactions during the six Circle Time sessions, as listed in Collier's list of language interactions. Out of the 394 language interactions recorded, the findings indicated that 372 (94.42%) interactions were academic language interactions compared to 22 (5.58%) interactions recorded for social language interactions. The big gap between social and academic language interaction was noticeably a familiar practice in Malaysian classroom. Social interaction in second language occurred mostly between teacher and pupils as the English can be spoken by only a handful of young Malaysians. For schools situated in rural district of Kuala Krai, the pupils depend solely on the teachers to use English (Miss F and Mrs M, first interview). Therefore, the social interaction in English is limited to following directions, routine greetings and imitating the teachers behaviour. This finding is in line with earlier research in this area (Mosley and Niwano, 2007; Mosley, 2006).

On the other hand, eleven academic language interactions dominated the Circle Time. Academic language interactions with the highest frequency were on using sounds/symbol association, decoding words by blending and segmenting, volunteering to answer questions and responding orally to stimuli. This is in accordance with research done by Bruce et al (2006) that illustrates children tend to use sounds and symbol associations to express their opinions.

All Circle Time activities in both classes were designed with the objectives to revise phonics contents and practice basic reading skill of blending. According to the teachers, the reason of the design was the pupils struggling performance in basic reading. There were also similarities of the activities during Circle Time perhaps because of the co-teaching sessions both teachers had with researchers for three sessions prior to the classroom observations. For example, Miss F's

first and second as well as Mrs M's all three sessions revolved around form recognisable words using the emphasised phonic sounds. Despite that, both teachers used different teaching techniques towards their pupils. Miss F designed game-based activities as well as pair work meanwhile Mrs M's activities were more traditionally teacher-centred. It is believed to be one of the reasons for Miss F's pupils produced higher frequency in academic language interaction compared to Mrs M's pupils. The interactions by Miss F's pupils were higher than Mrs M's in five out of seven types of academic language interaction.

Social Language Interaction

Different types of social interaction occurred during Miss F's and Mrs M's sessions. During Miss F's sessions, three types of social language interaction were observed which summed to 14 occurrences meanwhile it was only two for Mrs M's sessions which summed to 8. The lack of interaction on social aspects may be caused by the teachers' choices as well. Both teachers limited to the use of social interactions so that more focus were on the academic content. This was reflected in their sessions' objectives and the need to carry out remedial activities on phonics with the pupils, as stated in their second interview.

Following general direction has the highest social language interaction in both classes. This happened as both teachers were managing the classroom which involved getting the pupils into places and making sure the class was organised before they began their lessons. On the other hand, two types of social language interaction, namely giving commands to peers and exchanging common greetings were not evident during circle time as compared to some in Miss F's sessions. The reason for this to happen was due to a reflection of Mrs M's pedagogical preferences. As described in her objectives and activities, Mrs M's approaches in her class was more traditional compared to Miss F's contemporary approach. Therefore, Mrs M's teacher-centred approach had somehow reduced the social interactions during her sessions. Collins (2013) confirms that whenever directions were given in classrooms, this encourages social language interactions in classes, especially in classes where active participation takes place.

Academic Language Interaction

Both Miss F and Mrs M were guiding the pupils to revisit the phonemic sounds throughout the observation period. There were seven types of academic language interaction observed throughout the six sessions of classroom observation. From the total number of 372 interactions recorded, the type with the highest frequency was the using sounds and symbol association. As revising and reinforcing phonics were the sessions' objectives throughout the observations, it was parallel with the types and frequency of interaction recorded. Both Miss F and Mrs M posed a lot of questions and stimuli to get pupils to interact with each other by producing sounds or relating symbols to sounds. For example, Miss F supported her session by using phonemic actions as listed in Year 1 and Year 2 Revised KSSR English Textbooks to help her pupils recall about the sounds. Bruce et al (2006) explains that using sounds and symbol association seem to be the most used language interaction in young learners' classrooms as they prefer to use sounds in interacting.

Increase and Decrease of Language Interactions

The findings showed evidences of increased and decreased trend of different types of language interaction. According to the teachers, the changes in the trend depend on the sessions' objectives. The types of interaction depend on the teachers' ability to address the issue so that pupils were able to gain the intended input, as defined by the objectives of the sessions.

Volunteering to answer questions

There had been a steady increase during Mrs M's sessions while Miss F's sessions showed a decrease on the pupils' effort in volunteering to answer their teachers' questions. This happened due to pupils' activity that was limited to the fifteen words used by Miss F during the sessions. Therefore, there were lacked of volunteers from the pupils. In contrast to Miss F's session, the increased in volunteering activities by the pupils during Mrs M session was due to the increased duration of circle time. As Mrs M mentioned in the second interview, she lost track of time during her sessions as her pupils were enjoying the sessions

as well. This situation was beyond her expectation as she thought that her pupils might be passive to volunteer due to their struggle with basic reading in L2 (Mrs M, second interview). By increasing the circle time, students tend to interact more, provided there is a lot of encouragement and question time posed by the teacher. This seems to be in line with research done by Durden and Rainer (2008) who commented that teacher's pedagogical approach often plays a part in determining the types and frequencies of students' interactions.

Responding orally to stimuli

Oral response on stimuli was the type of language interaction with the fourth highest frequency. Based on the frequency analysis of the type, there were a considerable high number of oral responses from the pupils. However, the second session for both teachers produced the least number (1) of responses to stimuli among three sessions of circle time. Responses in Miss F sessions were higher than Mrs M because she had been using sounds cards and games to encourage more responses. She also accepted all possible answer by her pupils, correcting them subtly when the answer given was wrong.

CONCLUSION

Although Circle Time was newly introduced to them, the two teachers involved in this study gave positive responses regarding its implementation in the classroom. This study showed that pupils benefitted from Circle Time in term of second language interaction as well as their social and emotional development. There were trends of increment in the frequency of most of the types of language interaction that occurred during Circle Time. What have been learned from this study is that teachers play a significant role in creating a conducive environment with meaningful interaction in the language classroom. Teachers must be creative enough to implement new strategies with their students. As the practice is pioneered in the western context among L1 learners, with a different educational setting, several adaptations need to be made if successful implementation is to be done in Malaysian ESL classrooms. There are more rooms of improvements which can be considered before making this approach a routine practice in the

classroom. Future study could be recommended to apply Circle Time, considering the many benefits it can offer.

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