

## CHILDREN SECOND LANGUAGE OUTPUT DURING PLAY: A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Received:** 21 Feb 2023; **Revised:** 28 May 2025; **Accepted:** 6 June 2025; **Published:** 11 June 2025

**To cite this article (APA):** Wong, E. Y. W., Tan, J. T. A., & Roy, S. S. . (2025). Children Second Language Output During Play: A Sociocultural Perspective. *Southeast Asia Early Childhood Journal*, 14(2), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.37134/saecj.vol14.2.1.2025>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.37134/saecj.vol14.2.1.2025>

### ABSTRACT

Language output has its role in second language learning and is seen as a source of L2 learning. It is used by the L2 learners as a cognitive tool to mediate their thinking and talking, hence, mediates L2 learning and development. English acts as the second language for most of the population in Malaysia and a compulsory subject learned in school. That is why having an interactive English learning environment is crucial for Malaysian students who come from different language backgrounds. This paper focuses on the L2 output and discusses how children's L2 oral language development and learning are mediated during a child's play through language output. Through languaging during play, it promotes language input and yields language output that co-constructs linguistic knowledge that draws attention to form and meaning. From the perspective of sociocultural theory, language is learned through interaction. Through the nature of play, the L2 output produced by the children allows adults (educators and parents) to understand the child's L2 level and scaffold L2 oral language skills which acts as a precursor for children's later L2 literacy development. It gives insight into the design of developmentally appropriate pedagogy that caters to young ESL learners' needs.

**Keywords:** Child second language learning; Language output; Oral language; Sociocultural theory; Play

### INTRODUCTION

Unique in her multiculturalism, Malaysia is rich in culture with the three main ethnic groups, namely, Malays, Chinese, and Indians including various indigenous tribes who speak their respective native language (L1). In a school context, classrooms consist of students of diverse language and cultural backgrounds. English, as the second language (L2) to most Malaysians, it is one of the compulsory subjects under the Malaysian education curriculum starting from the preschool level, children as young as four years old begin learning English as their second language (L2) in a school context. Nevertheless, despite the exposure of English at the young age, the incompetency of English oral communication skills is still a concern among Malaysian older students. Speaking in English is seen as contributing the most apprehensive experience among Malaysian students from different academic levels (Kaur, 2022; Wathumalai & Mohd

Shah, 2022). Various internal and external factors contribute to Malaysian students' difficulties in speaking English such as motivation, anxiety, English proficiency level, and classroom instructional approach (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). Study pertaining to L2 instruction to Malaysian young children is underexplored. As early years of a child's life play an important part of the child's existence, an inappropriate teaching approach and learning experience could cause negative outcomes in children's later years such the incompetency of English oral communication. In learning a L2, from the perspective of sociocultural theory (SCT), young children learn through social interaction. Due to the diverse language backgrounds among Malaysian young children and the heterogeneous learning context, an interactive language learning environment is essential to engage young children's use of English. It provides young children opportunities to interact in the target language as classroom interaction could be their primary English environment due to the native language use at home.

However, drawing on the Malaysia National Preschool Standard Curriculum (*Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan*, KSPK), pertinent studies indicate the lack of interactive language learning in the Malaysian school context (Hendi & Asmawi, 2018; Mustafa & Ahmad, 2017; Tee & Nor, 2018) despite the implementation of interactive play-based learning highlighted in NPSC. In Malaysia, the advantages of learning through play are acknowledged; nevertheless, explicit instructions regarding its implementation are lacking (Abu Bakar & Mat Som, 2018). In Mustafa and Ahmad's (2017), repetition and translation were used and observed during the English lessons. These approaches provide some inputs to young children, but they are not given opportunity to produce substantial language output to develop their language skills. Only input is provided is insufficient for a language development. Language output is equally important in many ways. Output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) suggests that language output allows opportunities for learners to pay more attention to how the meaning is expressed through language. When children are immersed in language-rich activities such as play, the oral language input and output occur reciprocally, it is where *linguaging* (Swain, 2006); the process of using language to make meaning occurs. To avoid possible misunderstanding, sociodramatic play such as role play is discussed. Through the natural setting of play, the L2 output produced by the children allows adults (educators and parents) to understand the child's L2 level and scaffold L2 oral language skills which is the precursor for children's later L2 literacy development.

This paper posits that L2 learning among young learners should be interactive of which ample opportunities are provided to young learners in allowing them to function the target language. Within the construct of SCT, this paper aims to discuss on how young children's L2 oral language could be enhanced by incorporating play in the lessons in Malaysia context. Therefore, the objective of this paper is (1) to identify how play could mediate children's L2 oral language development and learning through their language output due to its interactive nature. First, the framework of SCT will be discussed. It then follows with the discussion on the contributions of play in young children's L2 learning based on the main constructs of SCT – mediation and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Library research method is used that involves reviewing and analysing data from the past literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sociocultural Theory and Child Learning

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) is the fundamental theoretical framework used in this study. In SCT, it is argued that social and cultural influence are important factors in child development. Vygotsky, the key person of SCT, argued that young children learn, and their knowledge is constructed through social interaction. SCT has been widely discussed in the field of early

childhood learning, educational psychology, as well as adult and child second language learning, to name a few. Vygotsky believed that learning and development are achieved under the core constructs of SCT such as mediation, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and internalization. From the perspective of SCT, humans' activities are mediated and regulated by tools in the physical world. The tools include physical and symbolic (or psychological) tools which help learners to make meaning of the learning. For instance, to learn the meaning and concept of a 'spoon', a child needs someone (an adult) to demonstrate the use of a spoon such as feeding and scooping with the tool (spoon). Children, according to Vygotsky, must be involved in meaningful activities with more knowledgeable person (teacher, parent, peer, and caregiver) and they learn by doing. SCT puts emphasis on meaning-making in the learning process. The interaction children have in and with their environment impact their development. The meaningful involvement of a child in the learning process is crucial.

In learning a L2, from the perspective of SCT, an interactive learning environment is crucial. Due to its emphasis of social interaction, it engages learners in a more effective language learning environment to young learners (Wu et al., 2024). By exposing young children to language-rich L2 environment, not only it promotes their linguistic capabilities, but also the feedback children receive during the interaction help to develop their cognitive skills. Children will apply these skills during their play or in the classroom during a similar situation. Notably, the pedagogy design of English learning for young learners should never be generalized to adult learners in terms of the differences that arise linguistically, psychologically, and socially development (Cameron, 2018). For instance, explicit learning such as abstract linguistic rules does not favour young children's language learning. Children generally give less prolonged attention in explicit learning compared to adults. As such, the appropriateness of tasks and instructional approaches should be considered. To develop an optimal L2 learning pedagogy, the understanding of children's learning characteristics is important.

### **Play and Language Learning**

Play is essential in early childhood development. It includes the multisensory experiences that stimulate children's learning in language. Children were found to be more inclined to participate in activities that employ multisensory learning (Rostan et al., 2020). From the perspective of SCT, children learn through social interaction and Vygotsky (1978) claimed the significance of play as an important socialization activity towards children which benefits their language development. Vygotsky believed that the overarching role play has in child development. It helps to develop children's cognitive and socio-emotional skills. For Vygotsky, play is "the leading source of development in preschool years" (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). The benefits of play activities integrated into language learning have been widely discussed especially towards pre-school and school-aged children. There are a variety of types of plays which are categorized into (1) epistemic; (2) ludic; and (3) games with rules (Hutt et al., 1989, as cited in Meggitt, Bruce, & Manning-Morton, 2016). The types of play activities include symbolic play, socio-dramatic play, role play and games with rules, to name a few. In brief, Cheep-Aranai, Reinders, and Wasanasomsithi (2015) summarized that play is:

An activity that integrates mental and physical activity in a meaningful context is characterized by enjoyment, spontaneity, creativity, and an absence of fear and punishment. (pp.142)

In the view of SCT, the most important and powerful impacts play has on children are the development of mental representations and symbolic function. Symbolic functioning is closely related to children's language development. Drawing on the benefits play activities have in

children's language development, according to Levy (1984, pp.167, as cited in Kostelnik, et al., 2011), they:

- Stimulate innovation in language.
- Introduce and clarify new words and concepts.
- Motivate language use and practice.
- Encourage verbal thinking.

Yee et al. (2022) pointed the effectiveness of play incorporated in various early childhood learning domains such as language, math and number learning, science, as well as social emotional. Young children were found more engaged in learning. Play enhanced young children language experience to be more communicative. During play, teachers may engage young children in purposeful conversations that stimulate their oral language development (Hunter, 2019).

### **Play and Children L2 Learning and Development**

In learning an L2, Winston (2022) claimed the importance of interaction and meaningful communication in the language learning context. Also, communicative competence and social competence should be considered as they play a significant role in children learning a new language. Play activities provide real and first-hand experiences when children participate in play. According to Sidek (2012), "language acquisition does not solely refer to the ability to produce syntactically appropriate language, but also consciously to understand the meaning and relevant functions of the utterances as well as being to use lexicons appropriately." (pp.28). In which, From the perspective of SCT, learning occurs through social interaction and children's knowledge is constructed through social interaction. Hence, considering the DAP, integrating play activities into English learning engages children's active conversation and stimulates active responses. Language and social development are intertwined. When play activities are integrated into an English learning environment, the active participation of children in the activities provides them the real and first-hand experiences in expressing their thoughts and communicating with others. In L2 learning at young age, role-play (a type of sociodramatic play) activities are pertinent to children's development, particularly in the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive domains, and serve as an effective strategy for facilitating English language acquisition as a second language (Mohd Nihazram & Masnan, 2020).

The comprehensive input through play activities allows children to make meaning of the language or vocabulary being taught. For instance, in vocabulary teaching and learning, a study (Istomina, 1975, as cited in Bodrova & Leong, 2015) indicates that dramatic play benefits young children at preschool age in vocabulary development compared to non-play conditions. It is beneficial when this approach is implemented in L2 learning. The objects or prompts used in play could act as the mediation tool to engage children in meaningful interaction with interlocutors (peers and adults) that develop both L2 production and comprehension. Being able to make meaning of the spoken language is essential for young children learning about L2. This includes the speaking and listening skills. Due to the 'authentic' language context play activities provide, it helps young children to establish the discourse skills of the target language and allows them to use the target language to communicate. A study in Philp and Duchesne (2008) indicated that interaction between peers enhances children's L2 learning which contributes to learners' L2 language acquisition and development of social skills. Furthermore, play creates a low affective context for children. It reduces children's stress (Jesse, Wilson, & Morgan, 2000, as cited in Kostelnik, et al., 2011). A low affective context is crucial as Krashen (1982) pointed out that negative feelings such as learning anxiety and lack of motivation may

impede the learning of a new language as it may ‘block’ the language input. Without acquiring sufficient input, it may then limit children’s output.

### **Sociocultural Theory and Language Output**

From the perspective of SCT, learning occurs in social interaction. It is, from Vygotsky, a socially situated activity. Interaction is crucial in the learning of L2. Through interaction, learners get to be exposed to and use the target language that is the ‘input’ and ‘output’. Krashen (1982) suggested the significant role ‘comprehensive input’ plays in L2 learning. However, only having learners exposed to the L2 input (listening) is never enough. Swain (1985) proposed the Output Hypothesis as she argued that language output plays a significant role in learning a new language. Language production (output) leads to learners’ knowledge of language use and ‘stretch’ their interlanguage to meet communicative role (Swain, 2000). To produce a language, learners need to create linguistic form and meaning which allows them to realize the ‘gaps’ between what they know and what they do not in the target language. Drawing on the significance of social interaction in L2 development that is paralleled to the perspective from SCT, Swain (2000) viewed language output as a socially constructed cognitive tool for mediating learning. The language used by the learners mediates the learning and development of the target language.

The major functions of output hypothesis include noticing, hypothesis-testing, and metalinguistic reflections (Swain, 1995). According to Swain (1995), through language output, the function of noticing allows learners to notice the language gaps of what they do not know or know only partially. Hypothesis-testing serves as the ‘trial run’ (Swain, 2005) in which learners are experimenting their L2 knowledge by uttering the language and receive feedback from the interlocutor. Metalinguistic reflections result learners’ reflection on the language (language systems) they learn, and such reflection can aid acquisition in making the process of noticing and hypothesis testing more explicit to the learner. Hence, an interactive language learning environment must be established to facilitate language output functions.

Due to the nature of children’s learning, an interactive learning context should be provided that engages children in oral language use. It is crucial to provide an interactive and communicative L2 learning context that could stimulate language output to young children. It allows them to engage in meaningful social interaction that leads to the making of the meaning of the target language. Cameron (2018) pointed out that for children who learn a second or foreign language, the notion of ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ language use is crucial as they may not use the target language as frequently as in the classroom. For example, in the Malaysian context, children may continue to speak in their native language (L1) with their family members and the exposure to the English language in the home environment varies. Interaction leads to internalization; mastery of the target language. Play-based learning has been long implemented in early childhood learning, hence, a communicative and interactive nature of play that yields language input and output may stimulate and promote children’s L2 learning especially their L2 oral language development. Oral language is the precursor of children’s later literacy development. Therefore, to lay a strong foundation for children’s L2 development, oral interaction should not be undermined. The output of language produced by children among peers and with the teachers helps children to mediate their L2 and create a zone of proximal development (ZPD) for scaffolding the L2 development.

### **Mediation**

In this session, how language output during play could mediate children’s L2 oral development will be discussed. As a key construct of SCT, mediation plays a crucial role in human

development and learning. Learning a language is a socially mediated process. Vygotsky argued that human activities are mediated and regulated by tools (physical and symbolic or psychological). According to Kozulin (2018), “Mediation is provided both by adults who ‘interpret’ the world to children and by the symbolic tools that, being internalized, become inner psychological tools to regulate the children’s mind” (pp. 28). In terms of child language learning, children develop the capacity to regulate their activity through language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Mediation is a form of regulation (Lantolf, 2004). On the other hand, in L2 learning, mediation acts as a “tool” to assist learners to perform tasks which they are unable to perform successfully due to their existing linguistic resources (Ellis, 2015). Mediation is a form of regulation. It goes through three stages, namely, (1) object-regulation, where objects are used to assist children in thinking. For instance, a cloth is used to lead the understanding of the action of ‘folding’. (2) Other-regulation, which is the explicit and implicit assistance provided by adults or peers. This is where scaffolding occurs; (3) Self-regulation, which refers to the ability to accomplish activities with minimal or without the assistance of others. In L2 learning, it is the stage of mastery of the target language.

According to SCT, learning occurs through social interaction. Drawing the significance of language output, study (Swain & Watanabe, 2013) indicates that language was used by L2 learners as a cognitive tool to mediate their thinking and talking about the language mediates L2 learning and development. By integrating play, for instance, the visuals and audio prompts as well as props used could mediate children’s interactions and stimulate oral language output in the English class. The mediating role of teachers and peers in L2 learning has long been discussed. Collaborative interaction and meaningful dialogue could mediate learners linguistically (Alkhudiry, 2022). Swain suggested that L2 learners co-construct linguistic knowledge when they are engaging in production tasks such as speaking and writing that simultaneously draw learners’ attention to form and meaning. From children’s L2 oral output during play, meaningful feedback such as addressing children’s language errors or slips during communication helps children to notice the errors made and provides a basis for metalinguistic reflection. This is where the *languageing* (collaborative dialogue and meaningful feedback) occurs; it helps mediate children’s L2 development. Collaborative dialogue according to Swain (2000) is knowledge-building dialogue. Swain suggested that L2 learners co-construct linguistic knowledge when they are engaging in production tasks such as speaking and writing that simultaneously draw learners’ attention to form and meaning. Through interactions in play activities, objects used in children’s make-believe play act as a mediation tool that could help them communicate and express themselves. This is the stage of ‘object-regulation’. In turn, children may respond to feedback by modifying their output towards more target-like forms. This would proceduralise language knowledge to reach automaticity – more fluent automatic of L2 production (Gass & Mackey, 2015). This is the stage of ‘other-regulation’. After noticing the errors or mistakes, the child may then correct and use the correct form of linguistic knowledge. This leads to the progress of internalization – the mastery of language use, which is at the stage of self-regulation. To sum up, in this teacher-child collaborative dialogue – the ‘saying’ (by the child) and the response to ‘what is said’ (by the teacher) is a language learning (knowledge building) mediated by language (Swain, 2000). The language output then serves as a ‘mediation tool’ to regulate children’s use of target language.

### **Zone of Proximal Development**

Mediation creates the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Bredikyte, 2012). The collective activities during children’s social interaction in play mediate children’s learning and lead to their ZPD. ZPD is the progress of learners’ actual developmental stage to their next level of potential developmental stage. There are two levels of development in learning, namely, “the

actual developmental level, which is the learners' actual level, and (2) the level of potential developmental level, which the level of learners could achieve with the assistance of an expert or through the collaboration with peers (novice). Vygotsky (1978) pointed out the significance of play as an important socialization activity towards children that benefits their development. In Vygotskian's view, in Sullivan (2000), "the role of play in the development of language is viewed as one creates a zone of proximal development (ZPD) in which the child behaves 'beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour'" (pp.123). ZPD is identified in play for children at early childhood age (Abu Bakar & Mat Som, 2018) and it facilitated children's linguistic and social development (Irshad et al., 2021).

Adults such as teachers and parents scaffold children's oral language and vocabulary through play (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). Scaffolding is relatable to English classrooms that contain learners from diverse language and cultural backgrounds due to the heterogeneous learning context in terms of language proficiency and background such as in Malaysia. In the notion of ZPD, due to the interactive and communicative nature of play activities, the communication between children and teacher as well as children and peers that yields language output promotes children's L2 oral development. Children's understanding of language concepts depends heavily on the feedback received from teachers. Therefore, conversation with teachers during play acts as a robust tool in scaffolding (Frazier et al., 2009, as cited in Hindman et al., 2022). It relates to children's vocabulary learning (ibid.) Besides, peers (more capable others) may stimulate and facilitate children's L2 development through oral communication during play (input and output). The back-and-forth conversation during play allows children to 'imitate' the language use of peers from their language production (output). In Vygotsky's sense, imitation in L2 learning is not copying (exactly mimicking what is produced). It is a complex activity to achieve communication. This could lead children's L2 spoken language to develop from a rather rudiment sentence to a more advanced utterance and sophisticated language after being exposed to a language and discourse-rich learning context. The interaction helps children to push their language output and enhance their L2 oral skills from their actual developmental level to the next new level.

## **CONCLUSION**

Studies have explored on how SCT could be applied in the context of Malaysia and the benefits towards the multicultural background (Abu Bakar & Mat Som, 2018; Evon & Joanna, 2023). The benefits of play towards young children's learning and the significance of communicative L2 learning experience have long been discussed. For instance, integrating puppetry in children English learning has shown to be a significant tool in providing a stimulative language learning environment that mediates children's learning (Luen, 2021). However, how young children's L2 output is mediated by integrating play which benefits their L2 oral development is underexplored, especially in the Malaysian context. Play provides children's ideal linguistic environment shall comprise input (language forms) and interaction (the way how language forms are used in conversation) that is crucial for children's language development. In play, the language input and output are intensified compared to teacher-centred approach. In L2 development, the language output children produce enables adults (educators and parents) to understand children's level of L2 skills such as phonological (pronunciation), grammatical competence, vocabulary development, etc. As play often associated with real-life events among young children and stimulates their language development, it would be beneficial for a more in-depth study on how play could stimulate and optimise children's L2 oral output that would benefit the English oral language skills of Malaysian young students' or young learners from other ESL or EFL countries meanwhile lower their affective fillers in English as L2 learning.

In summary, the implementation of young learners L2 teaching and learning through play in Malaysia context should be given high attention. Hence, teacher training is necessary in enhancing the content knowledge and pedagogy with regards to the integration of play in L2 instruction towards young children.

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