

## The Influence of Symbolic Play on Early Literacy Development

JALIL, Sajlia

ABU BAKAR, Mukhlis

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

**Abstract:** Children's earliest discoveries about literacy are learned through active engagement with their social and cultural worlds (Bissex, 1980). Play is a social activity that evolves through the internalization of socio-cultural processes and practices, a tool enabling children to learn about literacy through interaction with the environment (Neuman & Roskos, 1997). Symbolic play supports the development of early literacy skills. It is the imaginative function of language: characterized by the use of explicit language to convey meaning, linguistic verbs to clarify and negotiate meaning, as well as the theme of integration and organization of language and stories, required in both symbolic play and literate behaviors of children that results in this (Pelligrini & Galda, 1990, 1993). In this paper, we take a close look at four instances of symbolic play narratives enacted at home by a group of three siblings over a two-year period. Micro-analyses of the play setting (props, play area), physical actions and movements, as well as the pattern of discourse contained within these narratives show a pattern of narrative competence (role appropriate language and story production and comprehension) and appropriation of socio-cultural experiences that Pelligrini (1985) argues is necessary for schooled literacy practices. Hence, it is within this context of purposeful, pressure-free play in familiar environments that children may best display and extend knowledge about literacy and how it may function in their worlds (Fantuzzo, Sutton-Smith, Coolahan, Manz, Canning & Debnam, 1995). We view these play activities as a useful pedagogical tool in the classroom. A dynamic and active classroom context for participation in literacy development offers children real-world opportunities to engage in language and literacy practices. Blending in situated learning with the more formal traditional learning ensures continuity between the rich contexts of home and school literacy practices.

**Keywords:** symbolic play, children, home literacy practices, early literacy development

### Introduction

In Bussis and colleagues' (1985) classroom studies of young children learning to read, they highlighted two different styles of learners: the divergent thinkers who tend to perceive multiple meanings and functions in objects, and the convergent thinkers who tend to narrow in on a single most appropriate meaning and function for objects. While the convergent thinkers might suit well into the standardized routines of classroom literacy practices where the ability to sit down and perform on written tasks is valued over creativity and spontaneity, divergent thinkers might have a problem adapting to such confining practices.

One type of divergent learning is demonstrated through play, specifically symbolic play. This involves transforming an object or oneself into another object, person, situation or event through the use of motor and verbal actions in a make-believe activity (Curry & Arnaud, 1974). In this paper, we examine instances of symbolic play enacted by young bilingual and emerging bilingual children within the context of the home to highlight the significant ways in which these plays contribute to their literacy learning. We regard these play activities as a useful pedagogical tool and, if allowed in the classroom, offer a continuity of learning experiences from home to school which would help the more divergent population amongst the young to negotiate the early steps into formal literacy.

### Children and Symbolic Play

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Children's earliest discoveries about literacy are learned through active engagement with their social and cultural worlds (Bissex, 1980). Children learn about literacy through interactions with more experienced members of the culture (teachers, parents, more knowledgeable siblings) in a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990). This means that their learning of literacy occurs in participation with, and is mediated by others in culturally valued activities. Symbolic play, usually perceived as a social activity, is one such culturally valued activities but which has often been greatly undervalued. The fact is, symbolic play involves the enactment of socio-cultural processes and practices which children internalize. It is an important tool that enables children to learn about literacy through close interaction with the environment surrounding them (Neuman & Roskos, 1997).

There are several lines of research studying the benefits of symbolic play during literacy learning. Firstly, the imaginative function of language: characterized by the use of explicit language to convey meaning, linguistic verbs to clarify and negotiate meaning, as well as the theme of integration and organization of language and stories, required in both symbolic play and literate behaviors of children, has been argued to encourage literacy development in children (Pelligrini & Galda, 1990, 1993).

Secondly, research has shown the role of symbolic play in improving children's comprehension of literate content in the form of better comprehension and recall of stories (Christie, 1983). Furthermore, symbolic play has also been shown to be useful for children's personal interpretation of stories in books and enables them to clarify their understanding of what has been read (Rowe, 2000).

Lastly, educational researchers describe the literate roles of readers and writers that children take on during symbolic play: reading to pretend babies, printing alphabet letters and writing pretend-shopping lists. It is through these activities that children explore the processes and purposes of reading and writing (Hall, 1987; Neuman & Roskos, 1991).

The data presented in this paper lends support to the usefulness of symbolic play in children's literacy learning which the studies above have highlighted. This paper contributes to the literature on symbolic play by situating the study in a bilingual context and recognizing such plays as tools to help divergent learners adapt to the curriculum during their very early formal years in school.

The paper takes a close look at four instances of symbolic play enacted at home by a focal child and her two siblings over a period of about two years. These are a movie-related dramatic play and three pretend play episodes (hospital cum kidnap, generic shop, and veterinary clinic). Through micro-analyses of the play setting (props, play area), physical actions and movements, as well as the pattern of discourse contained within these narratives, we show a pattern of narrative competence (role-appropriate language and story production or re-production as well as comprehension of story) and appropriation of socio-cultural experiences that Pelligrini (1985) argues is necessary for schooled literacy practices. The pattern of literacy co-constructed by the siblings also shows evidence of their bilingualism and biliteracy – resources that they use at home and which they bring to school.

### **The study: emerging literacy of Malay children**

#### *Setting and participants*

This research set out to provide a longitudinal study of 8 Malay children's home and school literacy experiences from age 4 to 7 attending different kindergartens in Singapore.

They are presently in Primary 1 in different schools. The children were selected with the help of their kindergarten teachers to represent different parental familiarity with education and experiences of literacy, using the mothers' educational qualification as a working indicator. The mother of the focal child (Naila) presented in this paper was a graduate teacher who became a full-time housewife after giving birth to her first child.

Malays comprise the biggest minority group (14% of the total population). Singapore's bilingual policy refers to language competence in English and one of the officially recognized mother tongues, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. In practice, English is the primary medium of instruction in the schools while the mother tongue languages are taught and learned as a subject. Depending on the socio-economic background of the families, English may be the first language children grow to be more competent in.

The data of Naila and her siblings presented below was drawn from the children's interaction with each other and with their mother at home over a two-year period.

#### *Methodology and data collection*

The study draws upon ethnographic research traditions as utilized by others in the field of literacy and education (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). These have all emphasized the contextual nature of literacy and the way literacy is embedded within particular sociocultural contexts. In studying the home and school interpretations of literacy, we draw upon several methods of data collection. These include: (1) semi-structured interviews with the parents of the children to obtain an inside perspective of their beliefs and values; (2) visits to the home over the years before or after kindergarten and on weekends where the physical setting and the informal interaction between parents and children were observed, audio and video recorded, as well as described in detail in field notes; and (3) visits to their kindergarten and primary school classrooms where interviews with the teachers were conducted and the classroom activities observed and recorded in the same manner as the home visits.

Data collected from Naila's home yielded four episodes of symbolic play narratives. Two of the episodes were self-recorded by the parents when they noticed the onset of the activity by their children. Another two episodes were recorded in the presence of the authors during our visits to the home. Each episode was transcribed fully and field notes as well as video recordings (where available) were used to obtain information regarding the language use, use of physical props, and physical actions displayed during the symbolic play episodes. Where episodes were self-recorded, the parents and children were asked to describe what they remembered had occurred during the episodes.

#### **Naila, Sufiah and Izwan**<sup>1</sup>

Each of the symbolic play episodes involved Naila, the focal child (5 years old at the start of observations), her elder sister Sufiah, (7 years old at the start of observations and currently in Primary 3), and her younger brother Izwan (2 years old at the start of the observation and currently in Nursery). The siblings live with their graduate parents, 38-year old father Mr. Shamsuddin (an engineer) and 36-year old mother Mdm Normah in a public flat in the western part of Singapore. The parents feature in some of their symbolic play episodes, taking on the role of clarifier or giver of suggestions and ideas.

Mdm Normah's 'teaching' instincts give her children early experiences of some of the school ways of literacy learning such as fitting into a schedule of eating, sleeping and playing,

sitting in one place for a period of time doing school work, being coached in appropriate listening behaviours, and engaging in question-answer routines with adults including being probed to expand factual accounts or to recognize their contradictions, and being posed with questions that not only asked for answers but also those that are used as reminders or underlined as adult's statement. Mr Shamsuddin's almost daily routine of teaching the children to recite Quranic texts adds to the 'converging' nature of the children's learning. Beyond these, however, both parents use every available opportunity for the children to learn through real-world activities such as shopping in a supermarket, holiday trips abroad or during play such as symbolic play.

The children have a room they call the "Orange Room" where toys such as plastic food objects, cash registers and puzzles, as well as other things like scarves and mats are stored. These toys and materials serve as props and the room becomes the stage where they play out their symbolic play together. Although this room is where they converge to explore symbolic play, the influences they derive for their play comes in the form of the abundant traditional as well as non-traditional literacy materials in other parts of the house. On the left of the Orange Room is the girls' bedroom which contains several shelves of reading materials shared by the three siblings. The books are suitable for readers of a range of abilities: books for beginners such as "Now I can say these words", Ladybird series suitable for kindergartners and Roald Dahl's books suitable for skilled young readers. The study room on the right of the Orange Room contains writing materials for the children to draw and write notes to each other.

The living room is where the family stores numerous VCDs and DVDs of movies such as JK Rowling's Harry Potter series, Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events, Roald Dahl's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory as well as CS Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The family would watch the movies together and the children as well as the parents can often be heard discussing the story-line and mouthing out the dialogues to their favorite scenes.

In Naila's family, the non-traditional sources of literacy such as movies are complementary to traditional sources of literacy such as books. Watching movie-adaptations of books inspire and motivate the children as well as the parents to explore the novels itself. This interplay of influence is also inherent in the children's symbolic play where both movies and books become rich sources of inspiration for the children to tap on while engaging in play. Below is a summary of the four symbolic play episodes that will be discussed here.

Table 1: A summary of the four symbolic play episodes in chronological order

| <b>Episode 1</b> (13min)  | <i>Participants (age at play)</i>                              | <i>Role(s) Played</i>   |
|---|--|---|
| Harry Potter movies:<br>(a) Sorcerer's Stone<br>- fighting the Troll<br>(b) Chamber of Secrets<br>- Harry escaping from evil uncle<br>- Harry and Ron going to Hogwarts | Sufiah (7);<br>Naila (5;1);<br>Izwan (2;1);<br>Mdm Normah (34) | Harry Potter; Ron Weasley;<br>The Weasley family;<br>Vernon Dursley; Hermione;<br>Troll; Professor McGonagall;<br>Argus Filch; Professor Snape;<br>Professor Dumbledore |
| <i>Props/Materials</i>  | <i>Language Use</i>  | <i>Interaction Patterns</i>   |
| stools as cars;<br>chopsticks as wands;   | Dialogue re-produced in<br>fluent English are full of          | Mainly re-production of dialogue,<br>laced with questions by Naila  |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| stuffed toy as trunk;<br>miniature pots and pans   | expression;<br>Discourse outside re-produced dialogue (to clarify, question) are fluent both in English (more dominant for Sufiah and Mdm Normah) and Malay (more dominant for Naila) | about what happens next, heavy of re-production of physical actions related to scenes;<br>Sufiah acts as the more informed player, guiding Naila with the dialogue;<br>Mdm Normah acts as clarifier and giver of suggestions.   |
| <b>Episode 2</b> (48 min)  | <i>Participants (age at play)</i>   | <i>Role(s) Played</i>   |
| Hospital ward:<br>(a) Injured baby   | Sufiah (7;6);<br>Naila (5;7);<br>Izwan (2;7)  | Mother/Injured girl;<br>Doctor;<br>Injured baby/Green goblin  |
| (b) Kidnap victim  | Sufiah (7;6);<br>Naila (5;7);<br>Izwan (2;7)  | Mother;<br>Kidnapper/Grandmother;<br>Kidnapped child  |
| <i>Props/Materials</i>   | <i>Language Use</i>   | <i>Interaction Patterns</i>   |
| cloth as blanket,<br>bandage;<br>ice-cream sticks as thermometer;<br>miniature cups to place medicine;<br>cloth to tie up victim;<br>stools to create a room | Dialogue produced in direct relation to the narrative mainly in fluent English and full of expression;<br>Discussion about direction of the play heavier on Malay.                    | Narratives produced seamlessly, few digressions away from 'play episode', good balance of oral narrative and physical actions;<br>Naila takes on the more dominant role, playing the characters in power, as well as making decisions on the direction of the narratives. |
| <b>Episode 3</b> (1h 15min)  | <i>Participants (age at play)</i>   | <i>Role(s) Played</i>   |
| General shop   | Sufiah (8;6)<br>Naila (6;7)<br>Izwan (3;7)<br>Sajlia (23)<br>Mdm Normah (35)  | Shopkeeper/Customer<br>Shopkeeper/Customer<br>Shopkeeper/Customer<br>Shopkeeper/Customer<br>Observer  |
| <i>Props/Materials</i>   | <i>Language Use</i>   | <i>Interaction Patterns</i>   |
| paintings, drawings,<br>books,<br>hand puppets and chopstick 'wand' as shop supplies;<br>puzzle blocks as money;<br>miniature credit card;<br>cash register  | Dialogue produced and discussion around narrative mainly in fluent English with occasional peppering of Malay when out of narrative.  | Narrative produced mainly a rally of buying and selling talk with the occasional bargaining; heavier on oral narrative rather than physical actions;<br>Interactants take on an equal role, in line with the equality in status of characters played.                     |
| <b>Episode 4</b> (40 min)  | <i>Participants (age at play)</i>   | <i>Role(s) Played</i>   |
| Veterinary clinic  | Sufiah (8;6)<br>Naila (6;7)<br>Izwan (3;7)<br>Sajlia (23)   | Veterinarian/Pet owner<br>Pet owner/Vet's neighbor<br>Pet owner<br>Pet owner  |

| <i>Props/Materials</i>  | <i>Language Use</i>   | <i>Interaction Patterns</i>  |
|---|---|--|
| Stuffed toys as pets;<br>Doctor’s coat;<br>Stethoscope;<br>ice cream sticks as<br>thermometer;<br>cloth as blanket and<br>bandage | Dialogue produced and<br>discussion around narrative<br>mainly in fluent English and<br>full of expressions;<br>Discussions out of narrative<br>a good mix of English and<br>Malay. | Narratives produced seamlessly,<br>more talk by the ‘vet’ while more<br>physical actions by the ‘pet<br>owners’;<br>Sufiah takes on a more dominant<br>role in the turn of events, in line<br>with her character in power. |

**Narrative competence**

*Role-appropriate language*

Naila, Sufiah and Izwan display and practice their literacy and knowledge of different genres by using role-appropriate language; using words and phrases normally associated within the schema of the episode, i.e. theme-appropriate. In the 4 symbolic play episodes observed, evidence of such language use was abundant:

Table 2: Role and theme-appropriate language use in different play episodes

| <b>Theme</b>      | <b>Words / Phrases</b>  |
|-------------------|---|
| Hospital ward     | very sick at night; call the ambulance; they take Izwan away urgently;<br>he’s a brave boy; stethoscope; thermometer; temperature; fever;<br>take out bad blood; cut under the skin;<br><i>kena jahit</i> [needs to be stitched up]   |
| Kidnap            | let’s just kidnap the baby; gangsters trying to kidnap us;<br>help me please!; we need to run!; the baby is no more safe  |
| Shop / Trading    | what do you want to sell?; you can name your price; I am rich;<br>buy from me; I’ll name the price; it’s a very good discount;<br>ran out of money; give you change;<br>I have discount on these few things;<br>you are my boss; you are my assistant   |
| Veterinary clinic | send your pet for check ups; let me check it and see what is wrong;<br>check the thermometer; bring it for a check up;<br>tomorrow is your check up date; he is having a fever;<br>check the temperature; 39.6 degrees; check his heartbeat;<br>swelling up; give it it’s animal fever medicine; x-ray;<br>no broken bones; blood coming out; put this medicine on the wound;<br>medicine will close the wound; feed my pet some medicine;<br>no more fever; coughing all day;<br>feed your koala milk 4 times a day: in the morning, at night;<br>check whether there’s infection; twisted his ankle |

*Story production – Narrative interweaving*

The stories produced in Naila and her siblings’ symbolic play episodes can sometimes take on a more complex structure. This happens when an episode begins with a certain

storyline and subsequently morphs into something else, which can be loosely or closely related. More often than not, this interweaving of narratives in a single episode involves the switching of roles played by one or more participants in the play. Below are two examples of the complex narrative structure which unfolded during (a) the hospital ward and (b) the veterinary clinic episodes.

(a) Hospital ward

In this episode, Sufiah started off as the mother of an ailing baby (Izwan) and Naila was the doctor they met in the hospital. Once the baby had recovered after being treated in the hospital, he was brought home by his mother. In the normal schema, this meant that the problem had been resolved. However, Naila decides to add a twist to the plot by making it more complicated. She says:

*“Kakak, kadang-kadang, ah, diorang naughty ... Sometimes dia naughty ... jadi diorang kidnap.”*

[Sister, sometimes, ah, they ((the baby)) are naughty ... Sometimes he is naughty ... So someone will kidnap him.]

Note that Naila was not only adding a twist to the plot, but she also included a social judgment and sanction on the so called “naughty” baby (that he should be punished by being kidnapped). With this twist of plot, Naila morphs into the new role of a kidnapper, whom she even has a name for “Emboss”, shedding her ‘doctor’ role. Sufiah and Izwan remained in their original roles as mother and baby.

However, now that a new problem has been presented, Naila realizes that she has to solve it in order to obtain closure in the episode. She then morphs herself into a third role, grandmother to Izwan’s naughty baby character and mother to Sufiah’s character, who eventually rescued the two. In her words:

*“Then the day was saved. Thanks to the mummy ((laughs)) Pasa! [Because] she made it that dia punya [the] Emboss tak boleh macam gitu [cannot do that ((kidnap)].”*

On top of that, Naila added another dimension to the narrative: in order to make Emboss sad, the grandmother and mother had to keep the house very clean. By then, Izwan had already stopped participating in the pretend play episode. Naila and Sufiah continued with their roles and cleaned their home. Towards the end of the episode, Naila added:

*“Then dia pretend jadi mak yang kesian [Then she pretend to be a pitiful mother]. Dia cakap [She said] "I'm tired. Can you wash the dishes?! Clean all the clothes? Wash the clothes? Scrip the floor, mop the floor, iron the clothes. And you go and clean the house.”*

Although this could potentially be another conflict in their storyline which needed resolution, Sufiah replied to this situation by acceding to her ‘mother’s request, echoing her sympathy for the mother who had worked so hard. This enabled a smooth end to their narrative, and the two siblings ceased playing in their character when Mdm Normah entered the room asking them to get ready to leave the house for their Qur’anic classes.

(b) Veterinary clinic

Prior to the onset of the ‘veterinary clinic’ episode, Naila and her siblings as well as the first author were engaged in a ‘picnic’ pretend play episode where we brought along our ‘pets’ in the form of stuffed toys to the ‘picnic’. The narrative evolved such that our ‘pets’ were taking a nap. When I asked Naila whether she would give a signal to mark the end of nap time, Sufiah was quick to interject and say:

“I’ll say, I will signal later ((for the end of nap time)) ... I am the best pet keeper. No I’m the doctor, if there is anything wrong with your pets, please come and visit me. Eh, where is my doctor coat?”

From then on, Sufiah began to take on the role as a vet, yet at the same time retain her identity as our neighbor. She makes her story believable by employing Naila, her neighbor, as babysitter to her pets while she goes to work:

“Alright, time to go back to work. She only sees her ... pet for a short while only. Then my neighbor will babysit my pet.”

From then on, Sufiah started to ply between ‘home’ and ‘clinic’, treating our ‘sick pets’ and visiting her pets at home during break time. When the routine became too cyclical and Naila and Izwan started to fight, Sufiah expressed her boredom to me. I suggested that she ‘closed her clinic’, i.e. stop the pretend play. However, Sufiah refused to give up her narrative and began to add a new storyline:

“No lah, she has to check-up many animals... See? Extra, extra, extra. ... I have to babysit the animals because the parents are supposed to go somewhere important and the babies are sick and they don’t have anybody to take care of them. So they called me.”

Sufiah is now not only a ‘neighbor’ and a ‘veterinarian’, but she is also now a ‘babysitter’. When she started to ‘entertain’ the pets, Sufiah realized that she had departed from her veterinarian character and acknowledged her new character:

“So I have to give the animals their medicine now... Then I have to clean them... Alright, now let’s catch some fish! Fishy fishy fish... Do you want to catch some fish? *Ini dah tak jadi doctor ni. ... Ni dah jadi zookeeper.* [This is no longer being a doctor ... This is already being a zookeeper]”

As can be seen from the two examples above, the narrative plot that Naila and her siblings came up with are full of twists, yet the siblings are able to interweave their stories together in a coherent way, and not get confused by the demands to switch from one character to another. Notice that both girls use two languages, Naila, in particular using her mother tongue when she steps out of the story to deliver her personal critique of the characters.

#### *Accurate re-production of story*

Naila and her siblings were playing in the “Orange Room”. Sufiah suggested that they re-enact their favorite scenes from the movie “Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets” which they had just watched the previous day. The following excerpts were taken from one of the scenes re-enacted by them. In this scene, Ron Weasley and his brothers rescued Harry Potter from his evil uncle (Vernon Dursley) and brought him to the Weasley home. The siblings were



impressive in this play episode not only because of their amazing memory of the original dialogue but also because they were able to take on the role of multiple characters in a single play episode.

Sufiah and Naila were able to re-produce the dialogues from the original movie almost accurately. In the following excerpt, where the original dialogue was short, the siblings managed to re-produce them in entirety.

*Excerpt 1:*

|         | <u>Transcript of dialogue</u>  | <u>Actual dialogue</u>  |
|---------|--|---|
| Sufiah: | “What are you all doing here?”   | HP: What are you all doing here?  |
| Naila:  | “Rescuing you.”  | RW: Rescuing you of course.   |
| Sufiah: | “Come on, get your trunk!”   | RW: Now come on, get your trunk!  |
| Naila:  | ((laughs)) “Come on get your trunk!”<br>((laughs)) <i>Lepas tu dia tengok.</i> [After that he looked on] | ((Harry looking on while Ron and his friends pull the grill apart with the car.)) |
| Sufiah: | “You better stand back.”   | RW: You better stand back.  |
| Naila:  | “You better stand back!”   |   |

When the dialogue gets longer, the siblings begin to face difficulty in recalling them in entirety. However, they tackle this problem of long dialogues by filling in for each other: when Naila hesitates, Sufiah jumps in with the rest of the dialogue, vice versa:

*Excerpt 2:*

|         | <u>Transcript of dialogue</u>                                     | <u>Actual dialogue</u>   |
|---------|---|--|
| Naila:  | “Well, Ron has told us all about you.”<br>“When did he get here?” | AW: Well, Ron has told us all about you of course. When did he get here? |
| Sufiah: | “This morning.”   | MW: This morning.  |
| Naila:  | “Your son drove the enchanted car to Surrey..”                    | Your son flew that enchanted car of yours to Surrey and back last night. |
| Sufiah: | “and back last night.”<br>“Did you really?”<br>((laughs))         | AW: Did you really? How did it go?<br>((MW hits her husband))            |
| Naila:  | “I mean it was really wrong of”                                   | I mean, that was very wrong indeed                                       |
| Sufiah: | “you!”  | boys, very wrong of you.   |

Even when they do leave out details from the long dialogue, the siblings managed to keep the gist of the story intact:

*Excerpt 3:*

|         | <u>Transcript of dialogue</u>  | <u>Actual dialogue</u>  |
|---------|--|---|
| Sufiah: | Ok. “Oh, it's Errol.” Then *chiok*<br>((pretends to hit a glass and laughs))<br>“Percy, get it please.” ((laughs))<br>“Oh look, Professor Dumbledore must know you're here.” | MW: Oh, that could be Errol with the post.<br>Oh, fetch it for us, Percy please.<br>AW: Oh, Dumbledore must know you are here, Harry. |

“Do you know.. where to get all these?” MW: There is only one place we are  
 “Diagon Alley.” going to get all of these.  
 Weasleys: Diagon Alley.

Sufiah and Naila were able to act out the physical actions associated with each character and scene they act out. The siblings weave in and out of character seamlessly. It seemed immaterial to them that they have to be Ron Weasley, Harry Potter and Molly Weasley all within one turn:

*Excerpt 4:*

|         | <u>Transcript of dialogue</u>   | <u>Actual dialogue</u>  |
|---------|---|---|
| Sufiah: | They are looking around the house.  | ((The Weasleys and HP reach the Weasley home. HP explores the house and looks at all the oddities.))                                |
|         | Then Naila <i>cakap</i> [say] "It's not much, but it's home" ((laughs)) <i>Cakap</i> [say]! ((Naila laughs hysterically)) “I think it's brilliant.”, “Where have you been?!” ((giggles)) “Harry, wonderful to see you.” | RW: It’s not much, but it’s home.<br>HP: I think it’s brilliant.<br>MW: Where have you been?! Harry, how wonderful to see you here. |

*Story comprehension*

In the above discussion, we have seen that Sufiah and Naila maintained a good memory of the dialogue in the Harry Potter movie. In the excerpt below, we will see how the siblings use this instance of play to clarify their understanding of the story. After acting out their favorite scene from Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets, Mdm Normah suggested to the siblings that they re-enact the scene with the trolls. Without hesitating, the siblings swiftly switched to a new scene from a different movie, Harry Potter: Sorcerer’s Stone:

*Excerpt 5:*

|                | <u>Transcript of dialogue</u>  | <u>Actual dialogue</u>  |
|----------------|--|---|
| 1. Sufiah      | “You are going to explain yourselves, two of you!”<br>“It was my fault, Professor McGonagall.” “I have been looking for trouble.” ((laughs)) <i>Lepas tu dia cakap apa?</i> [What did she say after that?] | PM: Explain yourselves, both of you.<br>HG: It’s my fault Professor McGonagall. I went looking for the troll. |
| 2. Sufiah      | // “If Ron and Har..” //   | If Harry and Ron hadn’t   |
| 2. Mdm Normah  | // “If Harry..” //   | come and found me, I’d  |
| 3. Sufiah      | “If Harry and Ron..”   | probably be dead.   |
| 4. Mdm Normah  | “weren't here...”  |   |
| 5. Sufiah      | “weren't here.. I'd probably”  |   |
| 6. Naila       | ((laughs))   |   |
| 7. Mdm Normah  | “be dead!”   |   |
| 8. Naila       | “I probably would have been dead.”   |   |
| 9. Sufiah      | Dead?! Dead means <i>mati</i> [die]!   |   |
| 10. Mdm Normah | Hmm... <i>Lepas tu diorang buat apa?</i> [What did they do after that?]  |   |

11. Sufiah Then, Professor McGonagall said  
 12. Mdm Normah something right?  
 Yes...
13. Mdm Normah What did she say? How many points  
 did she take away?  
 13. Naila // How many points did she take  
 14. Sufiah away? //  
 15. Naila // 5! //  
 16. Mdm Normah 5  
 She take away?! I thought give..  
 She gave Ron and Harry.. ((laughs)).
17. Naila She gave Ron and Harry some  
 18. Sufiah points, but she took away points  
 19. Sufiah from Hermione right?  
 19. Naila Oh.  
 20. Sufiah I didn't know that. I thought..  
 // Professor McGonagall.. //
21. Mdm Normah // 5 points eh? //  
 Give all of the Gryffindor..  
 ((laughs))  
 She gave 5 points each for Harry  
 and Ron but she took away 5 from  
 ...  
 22. Naila Hermione because Hermione said  
 23. Mdm Normah it's her fault that Ron and Harry  
 were there...
24. Naila ...  
 25. Mdm Normah How many?  
 26. Naila She, she gave Ron 5 points and she  
 27. Mdm Normah gave Harry 5 points.  
 Then Hermione?  
 ...  
 She took away 5 points.  
 28. Naila Then how all?  
 29. Mdm Normah Ah, so altogether 10 points for  
 Gryffindor.  
 ...  
 Hermione get.. how many?!  
 She did not get points, she got points  
 taken away.

In Turn 8, despite herself saying the phrase “be dead” in an earlier turn, Naila realizes the implication of the word and sought to clarify what she understood of it (which alas, is pretty grim for a young girl) with Sufiah.

In Turn 13, once again, Naila showed that she had good memory of the events: she was able to tell Mdm Normah that 5 points were involved in the transaction between Professor McGonagall and the Gryffindor trio (Harry, Ron and Hermione). However, between turns 15 and 29, Naila and Sufiah both discovered something new about the story they had watched over and over again.

The two siblings had thought that the Gryffindor trio were all given points, only to realize, from Mdm Normah's clarification that it was not true for Hermione who had points taken away for her misbehavior. Despite Mdm Normah explaining it quite clearly in Turn 21, Naila was still unable to accept that not all the Gryffindor members received the same treatment, and kept asking Mdm Normah how many points they received as a group, "Then how all?" in Turn 26. She continued to question Hermione's plight (Turns 24 and 28) and finally accepted it when Mdm Normah pointed out clearly to her in Turn 29, "She did not get points, she got points taken away."

Here, we see that the story which they took for granted all these while had in fact been misinterpreted and was only clarified during their play episode. Thus, instances of pretend play are important sources where children's understanding of the content of a story could be verified.

### **Appropriation of socio-cultural knowledge and experiences**

During symbolic play, children's make-up dialogue and narratives often shed insight on socio-cultural knowledge or experiences that they have acquired. Naila, Sufiah and Izwan are no different. Below are examples of some of these knowledge that had been appropriated and incorporated into their four symbolic play episodes:

#### *Milk is good for you when you are sick*

- Naila: Some more milk. You must drink milk! Later you can feel better ... I have to put more milk. To make him better.
- Sufiah: Feed it milk ... Four times a day and make sure it is one liter of milk ok? A liter of milk. ... Um, there you are, your medicine.

#### *Bad blood makes you sick*

- Naila: Nak check. I'm taking ALL his bad blood lah. I'm taking some of his bad blood. ... This, this blood is bad. It's a white blood so it's bad. ...

#### *Product value depends on several criteria*

- Sufiah: It is two dollars because it's very very goooood. ((quality))
- Sufiah: Ok the hand puppets must be cheap. It is made of paper! ((material))
- Sufiah: Wand have to be very expensive. ((rarity))
- Sufiah: They are too pretty to be cheap. ((aesthetic value))

#### *Importance of family support for entrepreneurial pursuits*

- Naila: Buy from me, buy from me! No, no, no! ((Sufiah ponders about buying from Sajlia)) ... This is your sister! ... I am your sister.

#### *Benevolence*

- Sufiah: Ya, I give discount to the poor people.

#### *Work to earn money*

- Sufiah: That's what working is for. To get money. Ok? *Kita orang kerja bukan kasi free nanti awak sendiri miskin, tak ada duit, tak ada makanan.* [People work not to give away things for free, later you'll be poor, you don't have money, you don't have food.]

#### *Medicine is a profitable career*

Naila: I'm gonna be rich, if I be a doctor then I can be rich.

*Follow-up check-ups are important*

Naila: One *sakit* [sick] koala huhuhu...

Sufiah: Ok, Naila, let me check it whether it is ok.

Naila: No!

Sufiah: I have to check her!

Naila: No.

Sufiah: If not, *kalau dia ada* [if it has] extra infection *macam mana* [what will happen]?

... ..

Sufiah: Naila, I want to x-ray.. I want to check-up your koala.

Naila: No!

Sufiah: Check-up means just.. ... To check if it's ok... *Kalau dia ada fever macam mana* [What if it has fever]?

*Notion of fair trade*

Naila: Please make a change. Please, please. ... Cos I make a change for everybody. No changes?! Unfair.

Sufiah: *Tak ada change apa, memang three dollars, Naila kasi three dollars.* [No change what, it is three dollars, you gave me three dollars.]  
((give change back to your customers))

... ..

Sufiah: Do you have any discount? ... Do you have discount for anything? I gave discount, I'm so fair!  
((give discounts to your customers))

... ..

Sufiah: Naila, that's not fair, it's not fair to have out of order ((out of stock)). Not even one of my things are out of order.  
((shops should not have out-of-stock items))

**Conclusion**

Educators have often been wary about introducing play into the official curriculum. However, from the discussions above, we observed how children, in the context of symbolic play, display their awareness of the linguistic structures and role-appropriate languages required of a certain genre or theme, creatively weave narratives of complex structures into seamless and cohesive episodes, practice their memory skills, clarify their understanding of a text, and display their knowledge and experiences of their socio-cultural world. Their bilingual repertoire of languages also allows them to effortlessly step into one language and out of another whenever convenient. It is within this context of purposeful, pressure-free play in familiar environments that children may best display and extend knowledge about literacy and how it may function in their worlds (Fantuzzo, Sutton-Smith, Coolahan, Manz, Canning & Debnam, 1995).

Naila, whose home life is enriched with both convergent literacy practices such as doing assessment books and Qur'anic recital guidance which requires a lot of discipline, and divergent practices such as symbolic play, show an uncanny ability to excel in both standardized routines and creative teaching in the classroom. In a classroom activity where the students were asked to prepare a grocery list for an imaginary birthday party in groups, Naila was able to take the context into account and decide on foodstuffs which were relevant

to children, those which were *halal*, for she was a Muslim, and most importantly, food that she loves to eat. Subsequently, when asked to write a composition about a visit to the supermarket related to what they had chosen in their grocery list, Naila once again performed well. This is one example of how convergent and divergent literacy practices can be combined to benefit all the children in class.

Educators should therefore provide opportunities for both situated and formal school learning, i.e., creating a dynamic and active classroom context for participation in literacy development where real-world opportunities to engage in literacy practices results in continuity between the rich contexts of home and school literacy practices.

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### **Endnotes**

1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
2. Transcription conventions: “quotation marks” = re-produced dialogue; //double slashes// = overlapping speech; ((double parentheses)) = authors’ comments; [square brackets] = English translation.

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