

Literacy and Psychosocial Problems among Aboriginal Students in Primary School in Cameron Highlands (Malaysia)

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Abstract

This study identifies the level of literacy and listed the literacy problems among Aboriginal students in Brincang Primary School in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia. Literacy is seen as a critical aspect in gaining knowledge that may lead to a prospect of better future. Brincang Primary School was chosen as it has been a tourist attraction due to the popular school destination, the unique design of its school building, and the distinct composition of students. Ten students ($N = 10$), who were 9 to 11 years of age were involved in this study, which used a case study research design. Data were collected through observation, interview and questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentage and frequency, while the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The study revealed that the achievement of Aboriginal students in reading in Malay Language were good only for five students. However, according to the national level they only master preschool reading level not standard one reading level. According to the teacher many of the Aboriginal students in the school were poor in reading. These students face psychosocial problems that hinder them from going to school includes family environment, low family income, mother tongue language, cognitive ability, curriculum given, and culture. Suggestions for the Department of Education, teachers and Department Aboriginal Affairs (JHEOA) are also listed to help these students to excel in education.

Keywords: Aboriginal students, literacy, psychosocial problems, case study

1.0 Introduction

It is known that the vision and mission of Malaysia Government in year 2020 is to produce human capital that is independent, knowledgeable and competent. The Ministry of Education has launched the Education Development Master Plan (PIPP) that implements a holistic education system to produce progressive and world-class citizens. At present, various modules has been published to help teachers deliver teaching and learning reading, writing and arithmetic in pre-schools and primary schools. The elementary education that starts from pre-education level until elementary level is the basis to development and expansion of the cognitive and affective domains.

The construction of Brinchang Primary School (BPS) in Cameron Highlands is one of the government initiatives to provide education infrastructure as well as to achieve the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy among Aboriginal students. Brinchang Primary School was built on Lot 69 located adjacent the main road leading to Tringkap Brinchang, Cameron Highlands. The construction started on 1st July 2000 and was completed on 30th April 2002. Brinchang Primary School has been fully occupied by both teachers and students on 13th June, 2002. From that moment, Brinchang Primary School starts sketching its own history with the aim of improving of the lives of these Aboriginal people in the future.

2.0 Problem Statement

A critical factor that often determines success and failure in learning among the aboriginal communities is the learners' ability to read. Education aspect has been the main focus of Malaysian government in achieving Vision 2020 so that no one will be left behind in the modern development. However, there are still dropouts and left behind among Aboriginal students in spite of the mission of "no left behind" in the pursuit of education (Colin Nicholas 2007). With the national education policy that always support the development of these Aboriginal communities, improvement among these people in line with the current world developments especially in education is expected to provide the aboriginal people with positive attitudes. Several studies have focused on education among students of Aboriginal communities (Johari & Nazri, 2007; Mohamad Johdi & Abdul Razak, 2009; Aziz et al., 2010), however research related to literacy among them is still finite.

This study was conducted to determine the literacy level of reading among the Aboriginal students in Cameron Highlands. Other than looking at the level of readability among these students, this study also investigated factors that hinder these Aboriginal students from mastering reading in Malay Language after they were taught for at least one year.

3.0 Literature Review

Community that places education as high priority in life will take adequate action to ensure their children achieve good grades at school. However, based on research regarding academic performance among Aboriginal students revealed different trend. According to Lim (in Nicholas Colins, 2000), the percentage of passes among aboriginal school children taking the Lower Secondary Examination (age 15) in 1990 to 1992 was between 43 to 59 per cent, compared to 69 to 78 per cent at the national level. Similarly, from 1993 to 1995, only 51% to 54% of the aboriginal students passed the Malaysia Secondary Examination (age 17) compared to 66% to 67% nationally.

There would be no changes in the passing rate among aboriginal students as studies proved that there were high percentage of absenteeism and dropouts. This has been attributed to factors such as lack of awareness on importance of education. Studies carried out by Abdul Razak and Mohd. Johdi (2009) and Tah Ling Way (2007) showed that the statistics of Aboriginal students who have not completed their studies in Form 5 in 2008 is deeply disturbing. Among the factors that contributed to the failure of students to complete their studies are the lack of awareness among the community about the importance of education. Tah Ling Way (2007) also looked into the relationship between low self-esteem and academic achievement among these students. Tay's findings showed that the female students have lower score of self-esteem than the male students, but the female students showed higher academic achievement than the male students. Despite this, these female students were found to contribute a great amount of drop outs before the public examination

was held. According to Azizah Kassim (1976), female aboriginal students left schools in order to be married and the Aboriginal culture believed that getting married at the younger age is something novel.

The failure of Aboriginal students was investigated by Johari and Nazri (2007). Their research has been conducted in Jelebu, Negeri Sembilan in 2006. A number of 90 aboriginal students of Temuan tribe, from 60 families was involved in this research. Data were collected using interview techniques such as home visits and observations. Open-ended and structured interview were given to parents, teachers, children and the community leaders. Research outcomes depict detailed findings how Aboriginal children failed in school. Factors contributing to their failure in school were the family background, socio-economic status, influences from the culture and also the school failure in implementing the educational policies in their school. These factors are found to be inter-related thus affect children performance in school.

Study related to teaching and learning Malay Language among Aboriginal students was carried out by Abdul Aziz et al. (2010). This survey was done to identify the problems of learning the second language, Malay language among the Aboriginal students in a primary school in Perak. In their survey, Abdul Aziz et al. (2010) identifies majority of Aboriginal students from Semai sub-ethnic is facing problems on acquiring the second language due to interference from the mother tongues language of the Students.

Thus, an understanding on the level of literacy and factors hindering the Aboriginal students to acquire adequate level of literacy is recommended so that prompt action could be taken. This paper attempts to state the level of literacy among Aboriginal students as well as identified obstacles on acquiring Malay language among Aboriginal students in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia.

4.0 Research Objectives

The objective of the study is to examine the level of readability among the Aboriginal students using diagnostic test and reading tests. This study also investigated factors that hinder them from mastering reading in Malay Language although they are being taught for one or two years.

5.0 Research Methodology

The design of this research was a case study using interviews, reading tests, observations and document analysis. Case study is a suitable method to study a small group of people (Merriam 1984). A total of five teachers comprising three Malay language teachers, the headmaster and senior assistants were interviewed to obtain data for this study. Data on Malay language achievement was obtained by conducting diagnostic tests and reading tests.

A number of 10 Aboriginal primary school students were involved in this study. They were between 9 to 11 years or in standard 3, 4 and 5, and are students in the remedial classes. However, only 8 students (4 boys, 4 girls) completed all the tests given for this study, while two were absent during diagnostic and reading test.

6.0 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency and percentage. The interview data were transcribed and analysed. The student attendance was taken from their attendance record. Performance in Malay language subject was obtained through diagnostic tests and reading tests. Diagnostic tests was carried out in 12 units. Students who are considered excellent are students who can complete 10-12 units, good students complete 6-8 Units, while

average students complete 3-5 units. In reading test, there are two books that need to be read by students. There were 24 levels of readability in this test. Students who can read 21-24 is considered as excellent readability, 20-23 levels as good, and 16-19 levels as average readability. Students' behavior were observed during the 5 days reading test was conducted.

7.0 Findings and Discussions

The data from the analysis of documents, reading tests and interviews with teachers were used to answer the research objectives.

7.1 Result of Diagnostic Reading Test

The results of Diagnostic Reading Test for the 8 aboriginal students were shown in Table 1. The result has 12 units or levels. Based on the findings, only eight respondents managed to reach unit 12.

Table 1 Result of The Diagnostic Test.

No.	Students	Result
1	Participant 1 (Boy)	Good (Pass test until Unit 8)
2	Participant 2 (Boy)	Good (Pass test until Unit 8)
3	Participant 3 (Girl)	Good(Pass test until Unit 7)
4	Participant 4 (Girl)	Average (Only pass until Unit 4)
5	Participant 5 (Boy)	Good (Pass test until Unit 7)
6	Participant 6 (Girl)	Good (Pass test until Unit 8)
7	Participant 7 (Girl)	Good(Pass test until Unit 7)
8	Participant 8 (Boy)	Average (Only pass until Unit 5)

7.2 Result of Reading Book Test.

A total of two books comprising "Fun Book One" and "Fun Book 2" were used to test the aboriginal students in reading. Results of the test were shown in Table 2. There were 24 levels of readability in this test. Table 2 showed that only five students managed to pass with good results on these tests. Two of them were considered average because they fail to read book two.

Table 2 Result of Reading Book Tests.

No	Name	Fun Book One	Fun Book Two	Achievement
1	Participant 1 (Boy)	20	19	Good
2	Participant 2 (Boy)	20	16	Good
3	Participant 3 (Girl)	21	20	Good
4	Participant 4 (Girl)	18	16	Average
5	Participant 5 (Boy)	20	19	Good
6	Participant 6 (Girl)	21	20	Good
7	Participant 7 (Girl)	15	Absent	Absent
8	Participant 8 (Boy)	16	16	Average

The study revealed that the achievement of Aboriginal students in reading in Malay Language were good only for five students. However, according to the national level they only master preschool reading level not standard one reading level. So their readability level is not at par with national level. Further reading intervention and test have to be conducted in order to help them master the reading skill.

7.3 Result From Interview: Teachers Perception on Factors Influencing the Teaching and Learning of Malay Language among Aboriginal students' in Cameron Highlands.

Based on the data obtained in the interviews, factors that hinder the Aboriginal students from learning Malay Language include high absenteeism from school, poor nutrition, poor attitudes and lack of experience, poor standard of living and culture.

7.31 High Absenteeism Rates

From the interviews with teachers, among the similar theme given was that the achievement in Malay Language of the Aboriginal students of Standard 1 and Standard 2 is low especially in the reading (verbally) and comprehension aspect. Among the obstacle listed was high percentage of absenteeism. A high absenteeism rate among aboriginal students has been national concern especially the Ministry of Education. This has also been known as the main reason the aboriginal students to be left behind in education and can not read well.

Through interviews and discussions with teachers regarding the level of students' achievement, most of them stated that the achievement of pupils in the school, especially for remedial pupils were moderate when compared to special education pupils. Teachers also revealed that their passion for learning in the classroom was not encouraging. Their limitation occurs due to the problem of regular absence from school. As a result, they had difficulties in mastering reading skills and were always fall behind in class.

Based on the data obtained in the interviews, factors that hinder the aboriginal students from learning Malay Language include high absenteeism from school. This results is similar to the data revealed studies by Johari and Nazri (2007) and Mohamad Johdi and Abdul Razak (2009). The aboriginal community is still found to be considered as underdeveloped community and left behind in terms of education. The main factor is due to the high absenteeism rate, followed by poor living conditions (Ramlah 2010).

7.3.2 Pupil's Attitude and Experience

Positive attitude is known as one of the important factors that contribute to the success of students. Negative attitude such as laziness contribute to students being unable to focus and play in classroom, thus will caused them unable to master reading skills well. According to Norazwa (2012), aboriginal students like to play, sing and dance. This is due to the fact that the aboriginal culture place entertainment as priority in life. Thus, Norazwa (2012) suggested that the teaching and learning activities in the aboriginal classroom should also involve activities such as playing, singing and dancing to help them love learning in the classroom. Furthermore, the activities carried out in the classroom should also involve knowledge about things around them (Ausubel 1968 in Tan Oon Seng 2003). This is because they are not able to remember things that are not around them. For example, the knowledge about Kuala Lumpur or Putrajaya is not relevant to them as most of them do not have any experience of going to these places. In order to maintain their

interest in learning, general knowledge that are going to be presented to them in class need to be about familiar things among these aboriginal students.

7.3.3 Lack of Nutrition or Unhealthy Life Style

The second factor that hinder their capability to acquire literacy is the low level of intelligence. In the interviews carried out, teachers stated that categories as having learning disabilities were also witnessed in their classrooms. Ng et al. (2005) claimed that poor health or lack of nutrition makes a person to be slow in learning or in knowledge processing (Ng et al. 2005). Data also revealed that the Malay language teachers have to use different approach other than books in the implementation of the teaching and learning Malay Language to the aboriginal students. Through observation, we found that these aboriginal students do not have a proper and balance diet. Girls were found to munch young 'pinang' (areca nut) as their tit-bits. The aboriginal students were also found to have difficulty to remember. If teachers taught spelling words which combine [consonant, vocal + consonant, vocal, consonant], such as words hammer (tukul), basket (bakul), bamboo (buluh) and porridge (bubur), it will take a longer time for these students to remember. Poor health is also a factor as many of them do not get proper nutrition and lack of hygiene that can cause the deaths of infants and children who are high among native community (Ngah et al. 2002; Ng et al. 2005; Saibul et al. 2009).

7.3.4 Stay in Rural or Remote Area

Most aboriginal students live in rural or remote areas without good infrastructure such as public transportation, road, electricity and water. Therefore, they rely fully on the school van or bus services to go to school. Teachers claimed that when the van does not come, the students were unable to go to school. The difficulty to go to other places were also mentioned when the students were unable to go to the hospital when they were sick. They depend a lot on the herbs around them for treatment. According to Saibul et al. (2009), these situations may also affect their health condition.

Poor Standard Of Living

Data revealed that most parents of the aboriginal students at Brincang Primary School still depend on forest products for family source of income. They looked for bamboo, rattan, herbs, fruits and vegetables for sale. Parents often expect their children to help them to make a living and this is also a factor they can not go to school (Mohamad Johdi and Abdul Razak 2009).

7.3.6 Lack of School Equipment

Due to poverty among aboriginal communities, parents are unable to buy clean clothes and school stationary for their children. Therefore, these aboriginal students are seen to come to school with clothes and shoes that are damaged, and dirty; and will not have any books or pencils to school (Abdul Aziz Shukor et al. 2010). The teacher informed that exercise book and stationaries would be provided during classes and were collected after the lessons were finished. Giving books and stationaries for students to take home would cause a greater loss as these things would be lost and new sets need to be provided later.

7.3.7 Culture

In the eyes of aboriginal people, living in groups is important. That is why most of them prefer to live in the jungle where their community live. This is one of the reason they deny modernization. According to Tah Way Ling (2007), the humble and low self-confident among aboriginal students in secondary schools prevent them from pursuing their studies at higher level. They were said to be scared of leaving their parents and the village to study. In terms of language, their natives' language or mother tongue is 'Semai' language while Malay is considered as their second language. Therefore there have difficulties in understanding Malay language. Teachers also stated that the aboriginal students have different life styles compared to students from the city. According to Tah Way Ling (2007), aboriginal students usually feel inferior and ashamed to mix with other races. Dropouts among the girls is common as they were found to marry at their young age and this has been the aboriginal culture for quite some time (Azizah Kassim 1976; Joraiha 2009; Suki Mee 2009).

The teachers also informed that these students eat monkey, boar, snake which can be found in the forest for survival, and this way of living contribute to their delay process of learning. The syllabus and references used in classroom does not address their customs, but always reveals other customs which are exceptional for them.

8.0 Implication and Suggestions

The aboriginal students will be able to read in Malay Language if the teachers are patient and innovative (Abdul Shukor et al. 2011). They have to use suitable methods in teaching reading especially computer-aided program, singing and dancing (Ramlah 2010). The teachers have to use drill or repetition in their teaching. Teacher must give positive reinforcement such as sweets, books, pencils and others to motivate these students to come to school.

This research suggested teachers who teach aboriginal students to work together and build modules which they think suitable for them. This is because the community consists of many sub-ethnics such as 'Semai' and 'Temiar' and has different experience and culture. So teaching method has to be tailored to fulfil the need of these aboriginal students. The Department of Aboriginal People Welfare (JHEOA) should also help in making the student' parents aware the importance of education for their children. They should also take the initiatives to provide transport to these students.

9.0 Conclusion

The success of a reading program did not depend on the teachers only. The teachers and students should work together to achieve the objectives of the program. Significant people such as the Chief or "Tok Batin" of the Aboriginal community and JHEOA should also play their role to promote awareness about the importance of education among the parents. The Department of Aboriginal Affair Welfare (JHEOA) should also help in obtaining transport, books and stationary for the students.

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