

## **Instilling Literacy Through Developmental Module Approach (DMA) Towards Orang Asli Pupils in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

Development of module has great impact on literacy today. This paper highlights the challenges and experiences of the researchers in an academic institution where the research project which initially began as part of an academic research initiative expanded to helping a marginalized community in need. Literacy pedagogy has to be relevant to the needs of the pupils who come from diverse contexts. As such there is a need for a method and module to design an appropriate pedagogy to improve literacy among these pupils. In this paper, we share the conception of instilling literacy by utilizing the Developmental Module Approach (DMA), an example of a systematic approach in improving literacy among a group of indigenous pupils specifically the Semai community from Terisu in Cameroon Highland, Pahang. In contrast, Malay Language is used as a medium in teaching across schools in Malaysia including elementary school of Orang Asli and a more significant second language use in the classroom by Orang Asli pupils. The finding has provided important insights for the development of the pedagogical module and may offer a clear understanding of reasons Orang Asli pupils lag behind in their academic attainment. Based on the interviews we found that among the problems faced in the Malay Language literacy are closely related to cultural and environment issues and how such disparities affect drop-out rate among Orang Asli pupils. The study is expected to provide input to the curriculum development center, educational administrators and teachers.

### **Introduction**

All academicians in higher learning institutions are required to do research. With many higher learning institutions in Asia striving to obtain the “Research University” status, emphasis has been on academics and their research. Each academic year, an academician is evaluated mainly on the number of journal articles that has been published and the amount of grant the academician has successfully secured. With such emphasis on research among academicians, I will begin this paper with some questions which I asked myself as an academic who is required to do research. What should I research on? To what extent, doing research, having grants and publishing scholarly articles in reputable journals dictate what needs to be researched? Is “contributing to new knowledge” a sufficient reason to embark on research? Being a researcher in the field of education and a minority among colleagues who are mainly from the Management fields, doing research in an area that is “not Management” is itself a challenge. University Utara Malaysia (UUM) is a management university offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the Management disciplines. The education (social science courses) offered in this university are from the department I belong to, the School of Education and Modern Languages. The academicians in the Education Department are required to carry out research and publish scholarly articles on par with the other academicians in this university. Furthermore, a lecturer’s Key Performance Index (KPI) for research activities which contributes to career promotion and evaluation includes requirements such as securing at least one external grant, publishing at least

two journal papers and presenting at least one conference paper per academic year. I believe it is difficult and challenging when the quality of the research carried out is determined by the number of journal papers published as an outcome of the research project and the amount of money secured from grants.

Our specialized area of research is on educational issues concerning the majority and minority population in Malaysia. The research project discussed in this paper can be classified as a project on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) which sees education as helping people “develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future, and to act upon these decisions” (UNESCO, 2010). We wanted to work on a project that emphasized the practical contribution of our research. As the *Orang Asli* is the most marginalized community in Malaysia, we believed that working on a research project with them would be valuable. It has been reported that a total of 147,412 *Orang Asli* live in Peninsular Malaysia (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development Malaysia, 2005). The *Orang Asli* remains as one of the poorest community in Malaysia due to poor educational performances (Nadchatram, I., 2009). Furthermore, our literature search indicated that there is very little written about education and the *Orang Asli* and these are either a one-off study or merely reports which lack empirical data (Sidal, A., & Zami, M. F., 2008; Nicholas, C., 2009; Chupil, T., 2003). We were very fortunate that we work in the state of Pahang, which has the largest *Orang Asli* community in Malaysia. To begin, we managed to get a Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) to pursue our research with an *Orang Asli (Semai Tribe)* elementary school in Terisu, Cameron Highland, Pahang. We felt happy to embark on a research area which was our area of interest.

Working with the *Orang Asli* school and interviewing the teachers, my colleague and I realized that very little is known about the *Orang Asli* pupils. Therefore, we knew that in order to understand the children’s experiences learning in the school, we needed to understand the practices of the community they come from. Thus, it was important for us to have access to the *Orang Asli* community. The objective of our study was to look at the literacy practices of teaching and learning Malay Languages of the *Orang Asli* children in school. After obtaining the necessary permission from the Ministry of Education (MOE), Pahang Department of Education (JPNP) and *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA)*, the Department of Indigenous Affairs in Malaysia, we managed to meet the Tok Penghulu of Terisu and through him; we managed to access and interviewed teachers in the school. Our initial research findings indicated that the children’s literacy practices in their homes are different. Literacy pedagogy has to be relevant to the needs of the students. A cultural responsive pedagogy has the potential to motivate students to read (Saedah Siraj, et al., 2005; Shahrier, et al., 2010). Language literacy education, especially in the Malay Language as the main subjects taught in schools throughout the country should be strengthened further in line with its position as the official language and national language (Article 152 of the Federal Constitution).

In Malaysia, literacy development among vulnerable groups such as the *Orang Asli* children has often been a major concern. It has been noted that the literacy level and learning achievement among this group of children is low (UNICEF Malaysia, 2008). The illiteracy rate among the *Orang Asli* children is also a cause of major concern. Redzuan & Gill (2008) reported that the illiteracy rate among is group is 49.2% compared to 6.4% which is the illiteracy rate at the national level. There is an urgent need for improving literacy among this group and the present study focused on developing a pedagogical module to facilitate reading comprehension which responded to the needs as well as the context of the *Semai* pupils. Schools and Malay language subject teachers have a major responsibility for ensure that all pupils are able to master the Malay language as early literacy skills of elementary school level. This is in line with government's aim to make the Malay language as the medium of unity and the country (Education Committee Report, 1956). Mastery of Malay language literacy is closely related to the function of Malay language as the language of instruction and knowledge in the education system in Malaysia. Malay language became the language of communication and instruction in subjects taught in schools and as one of the main subjects in the

national education system for more than half a century. In fact the challenges of globalization, the teacher must be prepared to strengthen the Malay language and literacy pedagogy to a transformation to suit the current needs in the various fields of study (Ministry of Education, 2010).

In creating a world class human capital, the government has made education as one of National Key Result Areas (NKRA). NKRA is a starting point toward improving overall student performance and enable them to have access to quality of education. Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to strengthen education, some pupils still lagged behind especially in the education of Orang Asli pupils. In Malaysia, the Orang Asli people are a minority of 0.5% of Malaysia's population. They can be divided into 18 tribes (Nicholas, 2000). Nicholas (2007) explained that if 100 Orang Asli pupils entering year one, only six pupils who will graduate up to grade five. 94% of them would not be detected either graduated or not. He added that the distinction between pedagogy and culture as a contributor to the existence of the problem. Our initial research findings indicated that the children's literacy practices in their homes are different from what is expected of them in the school (Renganathan, S, & Chong, S. L., 2010). Some studies suggest that children's experiences at home influence the types of skills they develop to succeed in formal learning environments (Wells, C. G, 1995; Heath, S. B., 1982). Teachers we interviewed informed us that they were reluctant to give homework or allow the children to take schoolbooks home because the children will most likely not bring the schoolbooks back. Furthermore, the teachers also believed that it is very likely that those books will be torn or lost. If viewed from the passing examinations among Orang Asli pupils, found them very far behind and can be categorized as those who are marginalized (Mohd Fauzi Harun, 2006). One of the elementary school which was inhabited by indigenous people found the percentage of pupils passing the Primary School Examination Test (UPSR) was 0% while the school was first established by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs since 1978. There are many studies on Orang Asli education. Among these are studies that are revolving around the reading skills of the Orang Asli pupils (Abd. Aziz Shukor, et al., 2010; A Review of Orang Asli Educational Levels (Nurahimah Mohd Yusof, et al., 2009). A Study of Orang Asli with the Acceptance of Mission (Halim Mokhtar, 2003), Studies of the development of Orang Asli (Noraini Awang Mat, 2001), and study about Orang Asli and Animism (Huzaimah Hj Ismail, 2006).

However, there are also some studies on Orang Asli literacy skills and practices. Among the studies on Orang Asli literacy with the use of school textbook (Norainah Mohd Salleh, 2004), the problem of literacy and reading skills among Orang Asli pupils (Farehah Mohd Hani (2000), study on the problem of Jawi literacy among Orang Asli pupils (Junaidah Mat Lia, 1999). While Syahrom Abdullah (2002) assess the reading comprehension tests, and finally, Azhar Adnan (1998), studied the factors that affect literacy among indigenous pupils in rural areas in Sarawak. So far, research on Orang Asli literacy in Malay language is very scarce and limited. Thus, this study aims to identify the key problems encountered in constructing sentence structure in Malay Language essay writing and reading comprehension as well as to illuminate the roots of the problem of Orang Asli pupils' literacy. The findings from our initial research suggested that there is a gap between the literacy learning and teaching practices experienced by the children at home and the literacy practices that are expected by the teachers in school. Therefore, we believe that in order to assist the *Orang Asli* children's literacy practices it is important to bridge this gap which exists. However, to help the *Orang Asli* pupils we faced a few challenges as academics. These will be described and related to in the following sections.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

To work with the *Orang Asli* community, we needed to carry out a qualitative based research where physically we needed to work with the school in their village. This study is a qualitative research case study. We believed that we could develop a module to start a literacy programme in the school and to

encourage literacy practices in the school where the *Orang Asli* children can also experience literacy in and out-of-school context. We wanted a name for our literacy module. The name should stand for the everyday challenge of being literate as well as the historical and sociological stance of sustaining literacy practices. The name must also refer to the *Orang Asli* pupils both “living out” their literacy practices and having their literacy practices ‘live on’. We decided to call our literacy module *3 Column Module for Constructing Sentence in Malay Language (3C)*.

According to Burn (1995), Merriam (1998) and Yin (1995), the use of case study research design using qualitative data is based on a study involving the observation of an individual or unit, a group of people, family, a classroom, school, a community, or cultural events. Merriam (1998) indicate that the case studies are used to enhance a deep understanding of the subject is reviewed, focusing on aspects of the process than output, and emphasizes discovery rather than confirmation of a theory or finding. According to Yin (1998), the case studies are related to the research strategy that focuses on the question of 'who', 'why' or 'what'. This means that case study research allows a comprehensive or holistic approach to determine the characteristics of an event or a real life. To get the complete picture, a case study should collect data from various sources to enable a deep understanding of the research (Burn, 1995). The participants of this study consisted of 33 Year 5 Orang Asli pupils and two teachers in Terisu Elementary School. Purposeful sampling methods were used in this research because this study involves the analysis of problems relating to the Malay language literacy among the Orang Asli pupils, the purpose of sampling is chosen as it is believed to represent the objectives of an investigation related to phenomena to be studied. Burn (1995) chose to portray the case but Silverman (2000) to choose samples so as to provide the information in this study. Creswell (2002) and Bogdan and Biklen (2003) states that through this sampling, the respondents were selected to provide the best source of information in understanding the phenomena studied. The researcher uses two experienced teachers who have taught for more than seven years and are willing to volunteer to be respondents in this study.

There are two phases in our research. The first phase is need analysis where effort is taken to identify issues, concerns and needs of the targeted audience. The present study looked into issues concerning the teaching and learning of Malay Language among the Semai elementary school students. In this study we concentrated on the design and development of the pedagogical module and the focus on developing sentence structure. Since the context of the study was the indigenous community, data was collected from the context as well as from the people who had knowledge about the indigenous people. Finally, the second phase was the implementation and evaluation of the module. Interview sessions with the teachers and teachers’ response were analyzed to further support the evaluation procedure.

## **Data Collection Method**

This section will describe some of the procedures performed to plan and execute the process of collecting data. Because the data collection process is complex, it must be planned and executed carefully. In qualitative research, rapport between researchers and respondents is necessary to reduce the concern and to build a trust (Glesne, 1999). Rapport facilitate researchers enough information to research (Glesne, 1979) and a built rapport allows respondents to give different information, personnel, or play in a normal situation and feel safe without being influenced by the presence of researchers.

Data were collected from two different methods which were interview and document analysis. The interview gave valuable insights about the issues as well as the needs of the Orang Asli pupils in

developing sentence structure in writing essay in Malay language. We worked together with teachers who are chosen as respondents. Rapport of researchers with teachers is one key factor in determining the success of this research. Through face to face interviews, the conversation was recorded using a tape recorder and record notes. Interviewing session began by asking the basic questions of general and simple form and then leads to more focused. This session was conducted to clarify the problems faced by Orang Asli pupils in learning the subjects in essay writing in Malay language.

## **Interview**

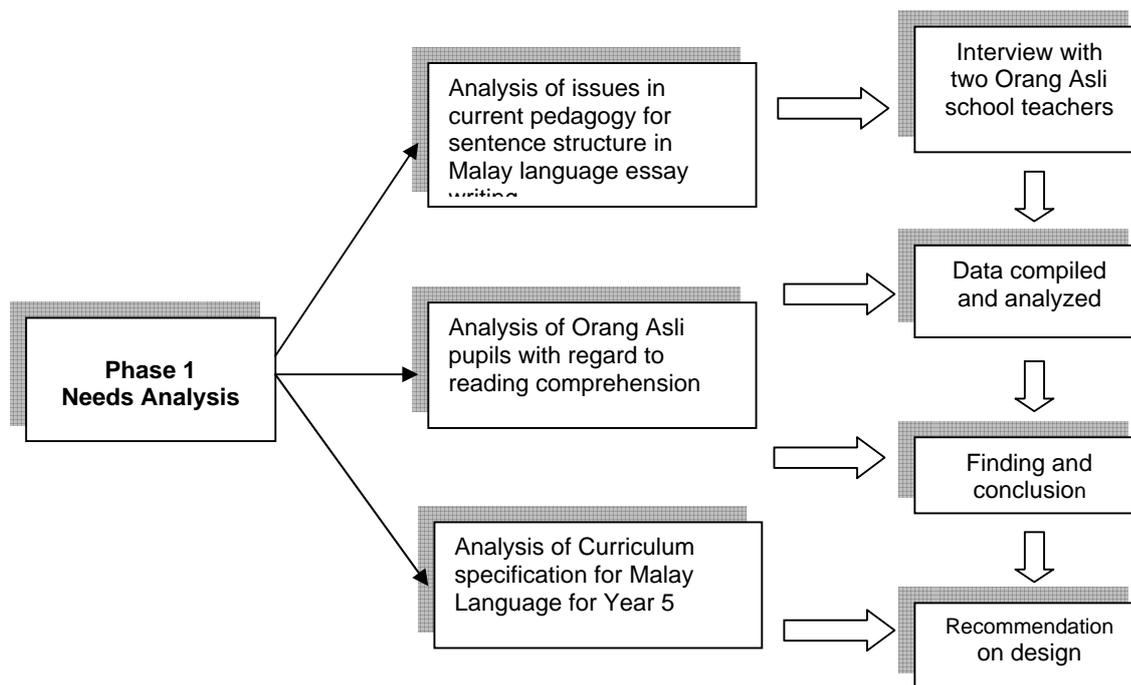
There are several types of instruments used to collect the information in our research. Our backbone method of collecting data is through interview techniques. Patton (1980), states that there are three types of interview techniques. They are formal interviews, informal interviews and open interviews. Fontana and Fey (1994) and Cannon (1998) also state that there are three types of interviews. They are structured interview, semi-structured interviews and structured interviews. In this study, we used semi-structured interviews because it is flexible and this allows respondents to describe what techniques it considers appropriate for this study. We interviewed teachers who taught Malay Language subject in Orang Asli schools. The instruments used in this study were interview protocol based on the concept of triangulation. The purpose of these interviews was to identify the major problems of Orang Asli pupils in the teaching of constructing sentence in essay writing.

In this study, the researcher used interviews in the first phase to identify the issues in the current pedagogy of developing sentence structure as well as the needs of the Orang Asli pupils with regard to reading comprehension. The interviews in this phase were carried out with two Malay language teachers from Orang Asli school. Data from the interviews were analyzed and categorized into themes that emerged pertaining to the first research question were comprehension, sentence structure, the present curriculum specification for Malay language, and reading text.

## **Data Analysis**

Content analysis approach as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984), and Merriam (1998) was used to analyze the interview data. According to Burn (1995) content analysis is a method of analysis is often used in qualitative research. Content analysis is used to identify themes, concept and meaning. In this case, requiring content analysis coding system associated with the goal of an investigation. According to Burn (1995) again, the category coding of emotion should be developed upon the first data collection has been done. The process of encoding make a researcher to understand the information obtained and to guide him to decide what should be focused on further information. Miles and Huberman (1984), states that coding is not something that has data ready to be analyzed, but it is rising continuously during the data collection process. All information obtained through interviews, will be heard again by the researcher through the tape recordings and compare them with records that are made. The analysis of interview data is done manually by the questions posed. The analysis of interview data was conducted in two stages, namely (i) the recording of the interview transcriptions (ii) search for themes and coding. Following is the description of the procedure in phase 1.

Figure 1.1. Description of the Procedure for data collection in the design phase 1



## Data Triangulation

Reliability reflects the situation that an investigation has replicated the findings of the research should be done in the same situation (Merriam, 1998). Triangulation is one method that can improve the reliability of a qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Further triangulation method can improve the credibility of the findings and recommendations that resulted in an investigation (Lincoln, 1995; Stake, 1995). It is expected that the use of triangulation methods involving data from various sources, namely interviews with teachers who are teaching the Malay language and document the pupils in these schools are expected to increase the reliability of this research.

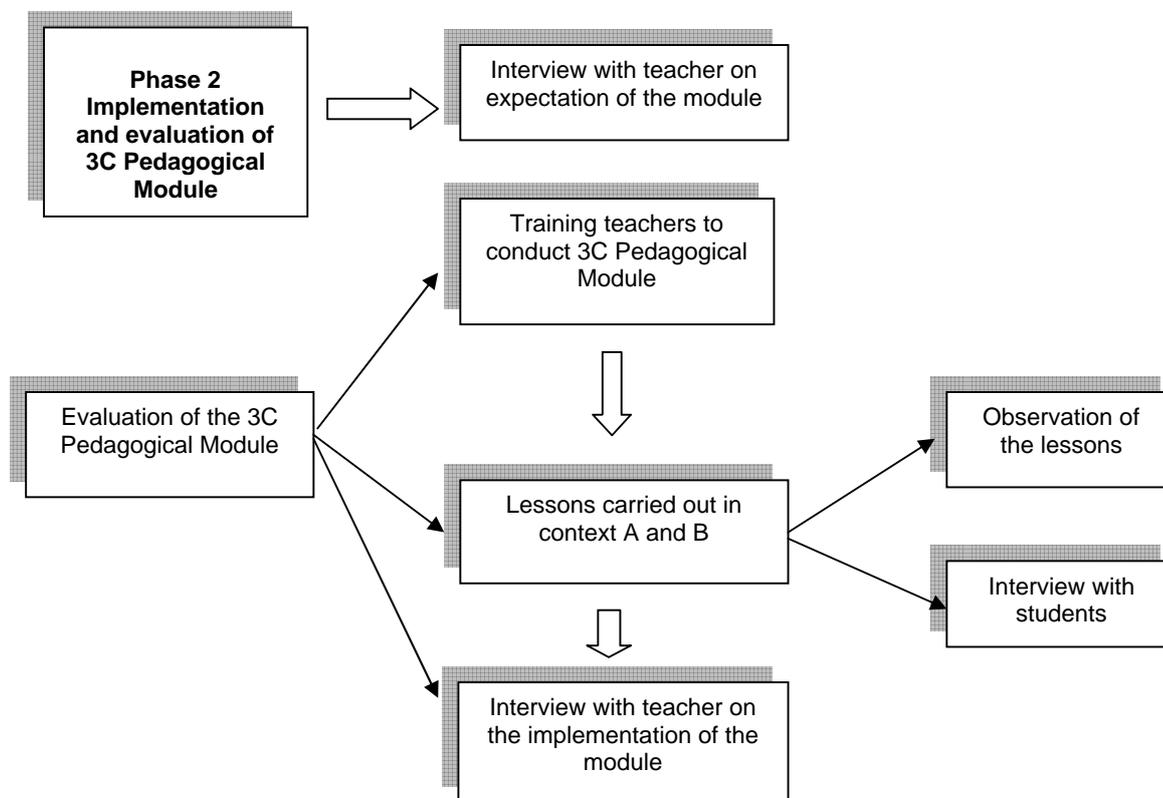
## Data collection Method for Phase 2

The research question in phase 2 was to find out the most appropriate design for the 3C pedagogical module. Data were gathered from interviews and observations in the context of the study.

## Interviews

Two sessions of interviews will be carried out in Phase 2. First a panel of experts in content will be interviewed to gain information for the 3C Pedagogical module. The experts in content include two experts in subject matter which was Malay Language and two experts with knowledge and experience of the Orang Asli and their context. The second session of the interviews will be conducted after the module was developed. Two experts will review the module and will provide their comments as well as suggestions for the module before implementation. The interviews will focus on the experts' view on the different module components. The components included the language, the layout of the text, the comprehension strategy and the comprehension task.

Figure 1.2. Research Procedure in the design phase 2 (on-going research)



## Observation

Data were also collected from observation at the Orang Asli school. We will observe the Malay Language lessons taught by the teachers. Several trips will be made to this location and during these visits; data will be gathered from the lessons observation in the form of pictures taken with digital camera as well as video shots.

## Year 5 Curriculum Specifications for Malay Language

The construction of sentences structure for the module were developed based on three skills from the writing component of the Curriculum Specifications for Year 5 and the selection of the skills was based on teachers' advice.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What are the main problems of Orang Asli pupils in learning how to construct sentences in essay writing using Malay language?

The present study showed that all respondents agreed that Orang Asli pupils face various problems in constructing sentences in essay writing using the Malay language. Some of the problems confronted in learning and constructing sentences in essay writing are problems of limited vocabulary. The main problems associated with limited vocabulary, comprehension and reading problems, namely:

- a) there were three or four pupils who can't even read in the classroom.
- b) although there are pupils who can read but not all of them understand the meaning of sentences particularly the complex sentences
- c) majority of the pupils are unable to master the basic skills of reading, speaking and writing. For them 3M meant; playing (main), eating (makan) and singing (menyanyi) instead of reading (membaca), writing (menulis) and counting/arithmetic (mengira).

In terms of writing skills, data from the interviews showed that only a handful of pupils can construct sentences using simple Malay Language vocabulary. Even writing sentences in Malay language structure, the pupils use the native language and translate directly to Malay language.

We know that students who can't write will have a problem in comprehension for example the picture shows kettle for "boil water" .. they did not know what is boiling... boiling water ... they only knows cooking. For these students cooking is a blanket terms for everything...many pupils have a limited vocabulary in Malay Language. (R1)

When we teach reading and comprehension, we give a picture to the pupils, below the picture we write what is boiling, cooking, steaming....we have to explain what is in the picture that, if we only tell them without a picture they can't imagine the thing...their vocabulary of concepts is very limited ... very low. (R2)

In terms of oral communication, the present study showed that the pupils are comfortable in speaking their own language rather than using Malay language. Pupils are not only using their native language (Semai language) when they interact with family members at home but they also speak while in the classroom and in school canteen. Malay language was not regularly used when they spoke with friends. Therefore, it can be concluded that Semai language is the main language, Malay language only act as a second language while English is the third language.

Another problem in terms of their existing knowledge was much less in terms of the use of words, the vocabulary is very poor. There think through their own language, the Malay language become a second language. I fined them 10 cents if my pupils talks in their language in my classroom but they did not talk only during the lesson but sometimes they whispered to their friends in Semai language. (R2)

Relatively limited used of Malay language outside school is because of the environmental factors. The Semai language structure influences them in constructing sentence in Malay language.

The pupils are compelled to write a composition in Malay Language UPSR examination. What I did is that the pupils must complete the 3 column as a guideline to complete the sentences they construct. If I do not prepare the column for constructing the sentences they sentence they construct is incomplete. This technique can only be adopted for rural schools only and when I use this technique it is easy for them to understand and construct sentences in Malay Language. (R1)

## Problem with their cognitive level

The issue and reasons why Orang Asli pupils do not grasp the lesson taught by the teachers need to be addressed. Results showed that they cannot understand and followed the lesson taught by the teachers because of their cognitive level. This is due to their low ability to understand the Malay Language lesson. The study also found that they could not understand the subjects, particularly the subjects that needs problem-solving because they are weak in reasoning power. The reasoning power is weak because they do not try to understand a lesson.

Orang Asli pupils are very weak in memorizing ... we gave them to read a passage. They can't understand the content of the passage...they just read but they did not understand it ... (R2).

## Contrast in the Pedagogy and Culture

The findings from the interviews, we found that Orang Asli pupils are not strong enough in terms of cultural learning. Their learning process is only valid when they come to school. When they return home, there is no motivation for them to review homework or study. Their parents did not play a role in learning process to their children.

The problem is that the pupils learn in school but at home learning doesn't take place. (R1)

The Orang Asli pupils are much more sensitive than their urban counterparts. "You can't discipline them in the same way as other students," If you scold them and they may run away from school. Also, language, and pedagogical and experiential problems make it hard for Orang Asli pupils to identify themselves with the academic syllabus. For example, they feel alienated by certain contents, like a picnic by the beach. Most Orang Asli lives in settlements located in forests and they have never seen the sea before.

## Peer Influence and Factors Related to Poverty

The findings of the interviews showed that peer influence plays a key role. This is because drop-out peers will affect pupils who want to go to school. Eventually pupils will also adopt truancy. It is no coincidence that the Orang Asli should experience both a disproportionately high rate of poverty *and* a disproportionately high rate of school dropouts. The two are intimately related. As any parent of school-going children will know, it is not a cheap affair to send and keep a child in school, even if only the most basic of schooling needs are to be met. It has been estimated that, without any subsidy or other financial support, a parent would need RM100.00 to RM150.00 per school-going child. With most families having several school-going children at a time, sometimes as many as 4 or 5, Orang Asli parents would have to have a sizeable amount of funds at the start of the school year. And this is where problem becomes more serious: the start of the school year follows the month of November/December which, because they are the wettest months of the year, are also the months when it is most difficult to get cash incomes. Rubber yield is usually low while collection and sale of forest produce, such as rattan, is both dangerous and not in demand. Thus, January is a time when already poor Orang Asli are expected to spend a considerable amount of money for school expenses at a time when there is very little opportunities for cash incomes.

All the respondents also acknowledged that the cause of too many drop-out rates among Orang Asli pupils because of:-

- a) low level of socioeconomic income

- b) transfer to more distant schools
- c) the level of awareness of elementary education
- d) low motivation
- e) low health status
- f) to help parents find the source of family income by working in the woods or in the garden
- g) the attitude of the parents were not scold children who like to skip this.

In addition, the findings of the interviews showed that all respondents agree that the sociocultural and environmental factors also lead to Orang Asli pupils less concerned about the important of education. Moreover, the levels of nutrition at home play an important role in mental and physical development of the Orang Asli pupils.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The first phase of the present study was conducted to explore the main problems faced by Orang Asli pupils in constructing sentences structure in Malay language essay writing. The study also identifies the problem of achieving literacies among the Orang Asli pupils particularly to pupils of Terisu Elementary School. Mastery of writing skills among Orang Asli children should be emphasized for the information transfer process will be faster. In this case, we will develop a pedagogical module for pupils of indigenous peoples. The process of producing this module is an ongoing process and the second phase is to test this module by using experimental methods and expert opinion. The construction of this module takes into account the views of Steinberg (1982) that children can read faster if the lesson began with meaningful elements.

This study gives researchers a wealth of information about the culture and mentality of Orang Asli pupils. What styles and methods of teaching and learning are suitable for them, especially in essay writing? The study is significant on that it provides a methodological framework and pedagogical principles which can be replicated in other context.

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