

‘A Pet Rabbit, Bunny’: Teaching English to Orang Asli Children, an Indigenous community in Malaysia

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Abstract. This paper highlights important issues faced by both teachers and indigenous students in the process of teaching and learning English in schools. Although teaching English to rural students has always posed many challenges, learning English language is believed to be important as not to disadvantage children in rural areas like the Orang Asli villages in Peninsular Malaysia. However, Indigenous communities like the Orang Asli have only recently made the transition from an oral culture to a literate culture. Thus, learning English not only requires Orang Asli children to be able to read and write, but they also have to learn literacy in languages other than their own mother tongue language. Therefore, by closely analyzing discourse patterns in two English language lessons in the classroom, I discuss some of the challenges experienced by Orang Asli students in learning English in schools. The findings suggest that to have meaningful English language lessons, the teacher need to accommodate Orang Asli children’s context, culture and knowledge in the lessons.

Keywords: Orang Asli, English As a Second Language, Reading, Literacy.

1. Introduction

In this paper I discuss how English language is taught to the Orang Asli students, a minority indigenous community in Malaysia. Orang Asli, or literally translated as “Original People” is a Malay term for the indigenous minority community in Peninsular Malaysia. Records from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JKOA) indicate that there are about 147,412 Orang Asli living in 869 villages, representing less than 1% of the total population of Malaysia [1]. The majority of Orang Asli (85.7%) still live in rural areas. About 3% live in small urban towns and only 11.3% live in urban areas [2]. At the time of the 2000 census, some 86% of the rural Orang Asli population had no schooling or only primary schooling [2]. It was also reported that in 2010, the school dropout rate for Orang Asli children is at 26% [3].

Although teaching English language to rural students has always posed many challenges, learning English language is believed to be important as not to disadvantage children in rural areas. Malaysian public schools use Malay language as a medium of instruction and English language is a compulsory subject taught at all levels. Furthermore English language has the status as the official second language in Malaysia. However, for school children in many rural areas in Malaysia, English is most likely a foreign language where students’ only exposure to English language is through lessons in schools [4][5].

Indigenous communities like the Orang Asli ‘made the transition from an oral culture to a literate culture only relatively recently in comparison to most Western or other major literate cultures’ [6]. Thus, being literate means the Orang Asli not only need to learn to read and write, but they also need to do this in languages other than their own mother tongue language. Therefore, in this paper, I particularly focus on the Orang Asli children because these children not only come from a marginalised minority community in rural Malaysia, but also because learning English is much more challenging for them. In addition, as in most rural areas, English is hardly heard or used in the Orang Asli villages. Furthermore, within the Orang Asli community itself, there is hardly any need for English language for their daily social practices. In fact, the main exposure and need to learn English only becomes apparent when Orang Asli children attend schools.

The case study reported here is part of an ongoing longitudinal research project that takes an ethnographic approach to explore educational practices of Orang Asli community in a rural village in

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Malaysia. In this paper, I focus on two English language lessons obtained from a 6 month weekly visit to an Orang Asli school to critically analyse how English is taught to some 12-year old Orang Asli children studying in Year 6. This case study highlights important issues faced by both teachers and indigenous students in the process of teaching and learning English in school. The primary data was obtained from notes taken during observations of the English language classes and is supported by interviews from the English language teacher and the class students. By closely analyzing discourse patterns in the two English language lessons reported in this paper, I discuss some of the challenges experienced by Orang Asli students in learning English in schools.

2. Research Context

The primary school caters for children in three neighbouring Orang Asli villages with a total population of about 770 people. The Orang Asli community who participated in this study are the Semai. The Semai people (a sub-group of the Senoi) are the largest community of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. The size of their population is about a quarter of the entire Orang Asli population. The students' age ranges from 6 years to 12 years old. Although all the children in this school are Orang Asli, the teachers including the headmistress are Malays, the majority population in Malaysia, except for one Orang Asli teacher who herself is a Semai.

The data from English language lessons described in this paper are whole-class sessions obtained from classroom observations of students in Year 6. The English language teacher is also their class teacher and at the time this study took place, she has taught in this school for about six years. There were 10 students in this class, 4 boys and 6 girls. The students' mother-tongue language is Semai and classroom observations revealed that students spoke to each other in Semai and switch to Malay when they speak to the teacher even during English language lessons. The teacher neither speaks nor understands the Semai language. Obviously, the teacher has a tremendous task of teaching her students English and English is taught bilingually using the Malay language in class.

According to the teacher, the text book for English language lessons as recommended by the Ministry of Education is not entirely suitable for her students. The text book is written for students who are learning English as a second language. However, the Orang Asli children learn English as their third language, after Semai and Malay. Furthermore, as stated earlier, the Orang Asli children have no other exposure or use for the English language outside their English lessons in schools. Therefore, out of her own effort, the class teacher prepares English lessons based on what she believes is suitable for the students.

The two excerpts described and analysed in detail in the following sections are based on classroom observations carried out during two 'Reading' lessons (refer to 3.1 Lesson A and 3.2 Lesson B). In the discussion that follows, I will highlight some important issues to be considered in the teaching of English for Orang Asli students.

3. Reading Lessons

3.1. Lesson A

This lesson began with the English language teacher giving the students the following printed text to be read in class:

A Pet Rabbit

Mary is my friend. She has a pet rabbit. She calls it Bunny. Bunny is a tame rabbit. It has white fur on its body. Bunny also has long ears, pink eyes, a short tail and long whiskers. It likes to eat carrots and other green vegetables. At night, it sleeps in a cage behind Mary's house. Bunny wakes up early in the morning. It likes to play in the garden.

The teacher then started reading parts of the sentences of the printed text and the students in chorus repeated after her. The teacher also asks the students to place their finger to trace each word on the text as they read along. After reading through the text once with the whole class, the teacher then asks the students to take turns to read the text aloud one by one. Each student stands up and reads the text. To illustrate the lesson in detail, the following section describes three students who read the text aloud:

Student 1

This student read very softly although the teacher kept asking him to read louder. He could hardly read the passage and had great difficulty voicing almost every word on the text. The teacher had to intervene and the student just repeated the words after the teacher. The teacher was frustrated with the student's attempt at reading and tells him in Malay, 'we have learned these words before', when the student could not even read or pronounce determiners such as 'a', and 'the'. The teacher also went over and touched the student's ears when the boy could not utter the word 'ears' in line 2 of the text.

Student 2

This student from my observation has the best reading ability in the class. Her voice was loud enough for everyone in class to hear. She managed to read the passage although she could not pronounce the following words: 'tame', 'fur', 'whiskers', 'cage', and 'behind'. The teacher was very happy with the reading of this student and praised her attempt as 'very good' when the student finished reading.

Student 3

This was the last student to read the passage. This student too was hardly able to read the words from the text. The teacher had to read the words first so that the student can repeat after her. As the teacher had to assist the student throughout the whole text, the teacher became extremely frustrated and annoyed. The teacher's tone, intonation and facial expression reflected this. She then said in Malay to the student, 'you have heard all your other friends in class reading, they have already pronounced the words and you still cannot read'. At the end of the text, again in Malay the teacher tells the student, 'you need to learn more'.

After all the students have read, the teacher writes the following words on the board:

pet tail vegetables ears cage soft
eyes wakes up white whiskers early

Then, the teacher asks the students to repeat each word after her. The students repeat in chorus a few times. Next, the teacher asks the students to take their exercise book and instructs them to write the meanings of each word in Malay. The teacher refers to the exercise book as the students' 'own dictionary'. The teacher helps the students write the meanings of those words in Malay in their exercise book.

3.2. Lesson B

This lesson is a continuation of Lesson A on 'A Pet Rabbit'. First, the teacher asks the students to read the passage out loud. The students read in chorus. From my observation only 3 of the students in the class were able to read and these students were reading very loudly. The other students could not follow the chorus reading. At the end of the students' reading, the teacher says in English, 'When you see an 's' at the end (the teacher writes on the board the words – 'likes' and 'Mary's'), pronounce the 's' [s/]. The teacher then pronounces all the word that ends with the letter 's' from the passage including the word 'eyes' which should rightfully be pronounced with a /z/ sound at the end. The teacher then points to those words with a long ruler and asks the students to repeat after her. This is followed by the following transcribed conversation between the teacher and students during this lesson and I have provided the necessary translation and information in square brackets, '[]':

Teacher : Do you all understand the passage
Students: Yes
Teacher : Whose Pet?
Students: Mary
Teacher : What's the pet's name?
Students: Bunny
Teacher: Is Bunny wild or tame?
Students: Tame
Teacher: *Tak boleh jawab begitu* [cannot answer that way]– tame!
 Bunny is a tame rabbit.
Teacher: What does Bunny have?

Students: (silent)
 Teacher: long ears, short tail.
 Teacher: What other vegetable is green in colour?
 Students: (silent)
 Teacher: long beans, peas. Think, think.
 Students: (Still no response)
 Teacher: Mustard leaves, *itu sawi* [the teacher translates that sawi is mustard leaves]. Broccoli? Broccoli is like cauliflower, *bunga kubis*, but it's in green colour. *Kalau emak pergi pasar suruh emak beli, sedap* [When your mother goes to the market, ask her to buy, delicious].
 Where does Bunny sits or stays?
 Students: cage
 Teacher: cage[/keɪdʒ/] not cake [/keɪk/]
 Teacher: When does Bunny wakes up?
 Students: Bunny wakes up early in the morning

4. Discussion

Many studies have demonstrated empirical evidence to support that fluency in reading ensures greater academic success among students throughout their schooling years [7][8]. Reading ability among students is often associated with students' reading and language practices in schools, family and community. Furthermore, reading in second language is a challenging cognitive task that requires students to master oral and literacy skills simultaneously [9][10]. Therefore, it is expected that it would be much more difficult for the Orang Asli students in this case study who learn English as a foreign language. Both lessons described in this paper focuses on students' reading ability of the above text, 'A Pet Rabbit'. By carefully analyzing the classroom discourse during these two lessons, this paper will highlight challenges faced by Orang Asli students learning English in schools.

4.1. Reading Aloud – An Intimidating Experience?

All Classroom discourse structure usually follows Sinclair and Coulthard's [11] framework where *initiation* is started by the teacher, followed by *response* from students, which is then followed by *feedback* from the teacher. Both the lessons above demonstrate this. The teacher always starts by giving instructions or asking the students to perform a certain task.

In Lesson A, there was no pre-reading activity to ease the students to reading the text as a whole-class activity. The data from Lesson A shows that even in a class where there are only 10 students, proficiency level in English differs considerably. There are students who are able to read the simple passage and there are also students who can barely string the letters together to form words. Generally, the text can be easily read by Malaysian pre-school children (6 year olds) in urban areas.

The English language teacher has been teaching in this school for a number of years and as a class teacher, she must definitely be aware of the students' ability and proficiency in reading in English. However, Lesson A demonstrates that the teacher knowingly instructs the students to read the text out loud individually although she is aware of the differences in the reading ability of the students. No provisions are made for those children who can barely recognize words because all the students in this class are asked to read out aloud. The majority of students in this class are not familiar with a number of vocabularies that appear in the passage. Reading aloud can definitely be difficult when vocabulary and sentence patterns are unfamiliar.

The teacher did not do a pre-reading activity where words that appear in the text are pronounced and their meanings discussed separately. The reading practice in this lesson does not give confidence to these young readers but in fact just highlights how poor they are at reading. It would be more encouraging and meaningful for the students if the teacher familiarises the students with the vocabulary, spelling, sentence structure and meaning of the text before asking the students to read aloud individually. Learning to read requires students to have the knowledge of the relationship between sounds and letters. Therefore, to be

proficient readers, students must be familiar with the English language sound system which will enable them to decode word independently [12]. Therefore, teachers must provide and engage in many activities where students can familiarize themselves with sound-letter relationships. Effective teachers must read an oral text to the students a few times so that the students are familiar with the sounds and rhythm of the language and understand the passage before the students can read loudly in chorus. Only after reading the text a few times with the teacher can the students read it aloud themselves.

Lesson A also demonstrates the teacher's feedback during the class discourse. The teacher's feedback and the tone she uses for *Student 1* and *Student 3* indicates her frustration when the students cannot read. Her comments suggest that students are not able to read because the students are not putting enough effort to improve their reading and not paying attention when the other students are reading. These students have limited knowledge of English vocabulary and because there is hardly any exposure to English language being spoken or heard outside of class, these students are more likely to have forgotten vocabulary that has been taught in class previously. Reading aloud can be intimidating especially when a student cannot read. Students will definitely feel self-conscious and embarrassed when they make many mistakes in front of their peers and teachers. Criticism and public corrections only exacerbate anxieties in students that make reading even more difficult.

At the end of Lesson A, the teacher helps the students in translating some of the words in the text. Translation of English words can be effective for bilingual or multilingual students. Although in the lesson discussed in this paper the teacher assists the students in translating from English language to the Malay language, it would be more helpful if the teacher encourages students especially those who are more proficient to help others who are less proficient to learn some English vocabulary through translation method. This would also encourage the students to use some of the English words learned in class with their classmates. However, Lesson A and Lesson B are typical of all English language lessons observed during the fieldwork where the lessons are teacher-centred and interaction during lessons in classrooms is controlled by the teacher. Furthermore, learning the meaning of the vocabularies in the reading text would have benefit the students if it was done as a pre-reading activity rather than at the end of the reading lesson.

4.2. Comprehension – A Meaningful Reading Experience

The main objective of Lesson A was for the students to read the text. There was no activity or initiation from the teacher for the students to understand the passage. In this lesson, the teacher has not anticipated ahead of the reading activity, the linguistic features of the text and also the cultural context that may require explanation prior to the reading lesson. A pre-reading discussion that addresses this would make the reading activity more meaningful for the students.

Meaningful reading happens when students understand what they are reading. However, Lesson A did not demonstrate this. *Student 1* and *Student 3* are barely able to read as they struggle to identify by sight simple words that appear in the reading text. Although *Student 2* is able to read the most fluent, she too gets stuck when she is not familiar with some of the words in the text. However, the teacher is more interested for the students to decode the English sounds to form words. To read in English, students must be able to perceive phonemes that make up spoken words and be able to decode them appropriately [13]. Phonemic segmentation can be very difficult for English language learners who have minimal exposure to listening to English speech sounds. It is important for the teacher to discuss explicitly with the students the relationship between sounds and letters because in English, this relationship is less consistent as compared to Malay, the language of instruction in school.

A major hindrance to reading and comprehension in English is due to limited knowledge of vocabulary [14][15]. It is important for students to understand vocabularies that appear in the text during reading lessons because studies have shown that limited vocabularies among Second Language learners is another reason why learners generally have difficulty comprehending reading texts [16][17]. In Lesson A, the teacher gives the printed handout on 'A Pet Rabbit' and asks the students to read after her. For adequate understanding of a text, a person should already know between 90 and 95 % of the words in a text [18] because some students are even able to repeat words and phrases without understanding them, while others can decode words and pronounce them without knowing what the words mean.

In Lesson B, (see line 6), the teacher asks the students in general whether they understood the passage. The whole class unanimously answered ‘Yes’ and the teacher proceeded with asking some specific questions about the text to see if the students understand. My observation shows that only one or two students were answering the questions loudly. However, the teacher carries on and tells the students to answer using the sentences from the text rather than one-word answer (see line 14). This is a technique used by teachers to help students to recognize certain words from the text and then to repeat the complete sentence that contains that word because even if students do not understand the question, the probability of these students getting the correct answer without understanding is high. However, the teacher did not emphasise this technique in lines 9, 11 and 23 (refer to Lesson B). Furthermore, the teacher also uses incorrect grammatical structures in lines 22 and 25 (refer to Lesson B) where she asks the questions ‘Where does Bunny sleep_s or stay_s?’ and ‘When does Bunny wake_s up?’. Instead of using the base form of the verb (sit, stay and wake) with the auxiliary verb ‘does’, the teacher structures her questions containing exact expressions from the sentences in the reading text which uses the words “sleeps” and “wakes up” (refer to line 3 in Lesson A). This is again to assist the students in identifying the correct answers from the reading text.

Comprehension also increases if the reading texts are culturally relevant to the students [19][20]. In Lesson B, the teacher did not initiate discussion with the students about having pets. Orang Asli children do have pets but from my conversation with them after the lesson, many of them do not give their pet names. In fact all the students from the class do not give special names to their pets. A student told me that he has a pet squirrel that lives in a tree outside his house. He feeds the squirrel when it enters his house or when he sees it near the tree outside. The teacher did not attempt to understand the cultural differences of the concept of having pets among the Orang Asli community. An opportunity to have a meaningful discussion that would have increased the students understanding of the reading text was missing in Lesson B.

During Lesson B, (refer to line 22) there was an attempt from the teacher to include discussion that goes beyond the text where the teacher asks the students if they know what ‘mustard leaves’ and ‘broccoli’ were. In addition, the teacher also suggests that the students should ask their parents to buy those green vegetables when their mother goes to the market. What the teacher misses is that these students’ mothers do not go to a market. In fact, during my interviews, majority of the Orang Asli women said that they have hardly been out of the village. The Orang Asli community either plants their own vegetables or get their daily needs from a Chinese vendor who comes in a little truck into the Orang Asli village to sell vegetables, fish and meat. Furthermore, ‘broccoli’ is an expensive vegetable in Malaysia and is not easily found in all markets. This suggests that unless the teacher shows a picture or brings a sample of broccoli to class, the Orang Asli children will not know what ‘broccoli’ is. Thus, Lesson B shows how unaware the teacher is of the students’ cultural context and her effort in this example to discuss issues beyond the reading text is not something the students would be able to relate to.

Twice during Lesson B the students were silent and were not able to answer the teacher’s questions (refer to lines 16 and 19). If the teacher had used translation method, where she could have given information in the Malay language, the students would have been able to decipher from the text an accurate answer for the teacher’s question. Teaching bilingually using English and Malay would have benefited the students during Lesson B. The teacher also corrects the students’ pronunciation of the word ‘cage’ (see line 24). However, there was no opportunity given to the students to practice pronouncing this word correctly. The teacher could have used the opportunity to show the students how the words ‘cage’ and ‘cake’ differ in pronunciation and meaning.

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the difficulties Orang Asli students face in learning English in schools. As the teachers in Malaysian schools are trained to teach English as a Second language, many of these English teachers, as depicted in the case study discussed in this paper find it difficult to adapt their teaching to suit the Orang Asli students’ context and situation. The findings in this case study points out that to improve the teaching and learning of English in Orang Asli schools, the teacher needs to be trained in various techniques and methods that would benefit students like the Orang Asli who come from an oral culture and whose cultural background differs from what the teacher is familiar with.

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7. References

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