PRINCIPLES OF LITERACY TEACHING IN A MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the teaching of literacy in Malaysia since it achieved independence in 1957 until the recent development of new Malaysia school curriculum introduced by The Malaysia Ministry of Education. The multiethnic population of the nation sets diverse environments in the teaching of literacy at school due to the needs of children to preserve their cultural identity and native languages. The paper then discusses the principles in the teaching of literacy in accordance to the need of different cultural and linguistic background of the students in Malaysian schools.

Keywords: principles of teaching, literacy education, multiethnic society, cultural diversity, linguistic ability

INTRODUCTION

The paper provides background study of Malaysian school students’ involvement in literacy learning and teaching processes. Many theories have been proposed to explain how language learners learn to listen, speak, read, and write. Bronfenbrenner (1979) views human development as occurring within overlapping systems of social and cultural organizations. The view stated that a human develops in a social-cultural system characterized by material, resources, activities and participation in these activities. Recent research has indicated that literacy is no longer regarded as a cognitive skill to be learned (Mahzan Arshad 2001) rather it is viewed as a complex interactive and interpretive process whose development is determined by the social and cultural context. In his study Mahzan found out that children are more likely to be involved in literacy activities if they are given authentic and purposeful activities. This view supports what Wells (1990) has states in his writing, “To be fully literate is to have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, feeling, and thinking in the context of purposeful social activities”.

Only recently attitudes of educators and newer research findings really supported the movement from a very skills-centered approach to reading and writing instruction of language arts classroom to a more holistic approach that focused on listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking as full processes that support each other (Cooper, 1993). How far does our language art classrooms in Malaysia practice such instructions is still questionable. Therefore, it is important to know types of literacy activities that students involved in and how these involvements help them to acquire the needed skills taught in classrooms. Information from such studies will help to plan and implement a more appropriate teacher educational program in all five languages at university and teachers training colleges in this country. Findings from these studies hopefully will help in developing new language curriculum for secondary schools, language texts books, reading materials, and teaching aids that can be used in teaching of the languages in the future. The findings will also help teacher to understand the needs of students in the process of learning a languages in their classrooms.
Literacy Learning in a Multiethnic Environment

Literacy education in Malaysian schools begins with the development of language learning in the classroom in correlation with most important educational policy in this country since the eve of Independent Day in 1956. The need to provide educational experiences that reflect multitude of students who come from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds is the main factor contributing to implementation of the process of language teaching and learning in Malaysian classrooms. In other words, the educational policy drafted before the Independent Day of Malay States from the British on 31 August 1956 focused more on language policy rather than the content of curriculum and instructional strategy or technique of teaching of any specific subject matter. This was due to the complicated and sensitive issues of the origin of the native people of this newly independent nation towards the end of British colonial administration. The study of history of origin the population of Malaysia is crucial to make sense of why this recent study being conducted.

The multiethnic characteristic of Malaysian population has evolved over the course of five centuries periods. It includes the Bumiputera or “the son of the soil”, a term that refers to all members of indigenous Southeast Asian races. The Bumiputera are composed of the Malays and the “orang asli”, the jungle dwellers who retained their own cultural isolation until these modern days. They are also indigenous groups in two eastern states of Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak, such as the Iban, the Melanau, the Kadazan, the Bajau, and the Murut who are in this category.

There are more than 100 different languages and dialects being used by more than 28 million people of this country today. The major language being used by the people is Malay. It is the national and official language of the country (Malaysia 1995). However there are many different variation of Malay being used by different people in the country. They use different dialects according to state, locality, and place of origin of the Malay who resides in the country. The Malay in Negeri Sembilan, a state in Malaysia for example, use Malay dialect that has been used in Minangkabau, a place where majority of the people in this state came from. There are also different dialects being used by the Malay in Perak, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu. Among native languages of Sabah and Sarawak are the Iban, Melanau, Dusun, Kadazan, and Murut (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1979). There are wide differences between these dialects and native languages, to the extend that one can hardly understand someone who is speaking in another dialect or languages. However, officially, the Malay dialect from Johor, which is known as Johor Riau has been used as the standard dialects for the whole nation. The dialect was also being used by the national electronic and printed mass media, and the medium of instruction in schools and higher learning institutions.

The second largest group of population in Malaysia is the Chinese. The old group or early Chinese immigrants, some descendants of those who settle in the land in the 15th century are called the “Baba and Nyonya”, mostly the native of early port states of Malacca and Penang. They are belong to the group of Chinese ethnic that still practice unique cultural heritage in these two major cities today. The new Chinese immigrants are those descendants of farmers, miners, and traders, who came in large numbers during the 19th century. Today almost all of the Chinese population in this country were born and raised in Malaysia and they are Malaysian citizen according to the right of constitution. The Chinese also used different dialect in the conversation in their communities. Dialects among the Chinese are Hokkien (34.2%), Hakka (22.1%), Cantonese (19.8%), Teochew (12.4%) and other smaller group such as Hockchiew, Hainanese, Hockchia, Henghua, and others (11.5%) (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1979). The language used by the Chinese in school and other important community affairs is Mandarin.

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The third largest group is the Indian, mainly Tamils, including those who are Hindus, Christian, and Muslims, followed by other smaller clan or those who came from the place of origin such as Punjabi, Singalese, Malayali, Telugu, Urdu, Gujaratis and others. Today 11% of the total populations of this country are Indian and each clan or group speaks their own languages or dialects and practice their own religious beliefs. However, Tamil is the language used in school by the Indian community in Malaysia.

The Arabs came to the Malay world since the 15th century and the main purpose of their migration to the Malay world was the “Da’wah” and at the same time trade. The Arabs mainly from the Persian Gulf have been known as well educated in Islamic theology and they were respected because of their knowledge and practice in the religion. Even though there were arguments from many historians who stated that the Malay Archipelago and the area surrounding them were converted to Islam by The Indian Muslim preachers, the role of the Arab Muslim could not being contested by many evidences that could be found in history. The appearance of the Arab in the Malay world are well known until today by the existing of community of the Arab descendant in major cities and smaller town in all over South East Asia countries. In Malaysia and Singapore particularly, the existence of “Kampung Arab” (Arab Villages) or “Jalan Arab” (Arab Street) in major cites and towns proved that the Arab communities have been in the both country and resided in the area since the early 15th century.

The importance of Arabic in the history of Malaysia goes back to the 15th century. Firstly it is the language of the “Quran”, and it carries all the knowledge and wisdom of the religion in this language. Secondly the Arabic not only brought the “Nur” or the Light of Islam to the life of the Malay community in the 15th century, but it also brought along with it the “Ad-Din” or the modernization or progression as a way of life to the Malay world (Mahzan Arshad, 2001b). The contribution Islam in education for the people for example, contributes to the opportunity to common education for everybody. The opening “madrasah” or smaller schools concept surrounding the mosque or smaller prayer houses compound brought the opportunity to education among the ordinary Malay communities and education at early age to their children. Thirdly, the Arabic has contributed to the development of Malay language as a modern language and language of the world at the beginning of the 15th century. Some of the most significant contributions of the Arabic to the Malay language were the introduction of the “jawi” or a writing system to the language, the introduction of grammatical rules in the language, and most importantly enriching the vocabulary of the language. Malay language as it is today may have not survived as a modern language without having all these three important criteria as a progressive and dynamic language. The importance of Arabic as a second language in our schools today could be connected to importance of the Arab worlds and their roles in politic, social, and economic ventures in the new century.

The history of English education in Malaysia goes back to the 1900’s. English education was first introduced by the British colonial rule in the Malay peninsula in early 1900. Penang Free School was the first English school, established in 1916 on the island of Pulau Pinang (Penang). The curriculum of this school was designed after the curriculum of grammar schools in the Great Britain. It was established with the view to producing junior administrative officers to support the British administration (Education Malaysia, 1985). Since then, more English schools were established in several major towns of The British Strait Settlement (British Colonies) in the Malay peninsula.

With the implementation of the Educational Ordinance of 1957, all these English schools were to accept the national curriculum. All the schools had the choice of using English as the medium of instruction in all subjects taught in classrooms. Even after the Language Conversion Program in 1970,
a policy by which English medium schools would gradually converted to Malay medium schools, English would remains a compulsory language to be taught in all grade levels in Malaysian educational system (Forey, 1988).

The government continued its policy in retaining English as the second important language in this country in the interest of the people, especially in dealing with international relationships, business activities, professional developments, technological innovations or advancements, and educational instructions in certain fields that are not available in Malay language. For example, instructions were only available in English language in most courses taught at the University of Malaya and most college-level professional and vocational schools until 1976. Courses in Public Health, Medicine, Business, Law, Engineering, and Information Technology in major universities in Malaysia were still using English as the language of instruction after the Language Conversion Program. References in these disciplines such as book, journals, research reports, conference proceeding, documents, and audio-visual materials are mostly available only in English. The need for English our country is a major concern among parents, educators and communities and political leaders. Recent development of making Mathematics and Science to be taught in English in Malaysia primary and secondary schools were the result of the concern of the declining of English standard among Malaysia younger generation due to the lack of exposure to the language. To fulfill these needs, the recent study examines how students were involves in literacy activities in the process of learning all the five languages discussed in this section of the report.

**Literacy Instruction in Malaysian Schools**

According Cambridge Advance Learner’s Dictionary (2003) literacy is the ability to read and write. However, in a broader sense, literacy skill not only involves these two activities when it is viewed in language art classrooms. Mahzan Arshad (2003) defines literacy skills as the ability to listen, speak, read, write, and think in a language familiar to the person who is involved in the activities. The definition provides wider meaning of literacy in educational setting and language learning environment. Literacy develops as students encounter many authentic or real literacy experiences and it develops simultaneously as they involve in activities prepared for them by teachers in their language art classroom.

One should be consciously aware that literacy is a sophisticated extension of the spoken language because literacy is about language performance. The emphasis of reading and writing is because of the notion that literacy to indicate a level of competence in dealing with printed materials. According to Mission (1998), until very recent times, the custom in educational theory discussion was to talk of the teaching of reading and writing rather than the teaching of literacy skills. If we examine prior and current literacy instruction, we will discover that it has been used for a long period of time. A description of its origin in Malaysia begins since we realized the importance of ability to read and write in our society back before the independent day in 1957. At this time, our children at these early days of Independent Malay States were expected to acquire the three “r” skills that were read, write and arithmetic. “Reading” was defined as being able to “word-call” or pronouncing words in the accordance to the sound of alphabets correctly. By word-calling, children could read aloud in the presents of a teacher or adult. Until early 1990’s The United Nation Education, Science and Cultural Organization defines literacy as the ability to read and write simple and short statement in his or her everyday living (UNESCO, 1991).

Back in the 1960s, not only children were required to master literacy skills, adult were also provided with the facility to acquire similar skills. Afternoon schools for adult or adult schools were
set up in villages and town to provide literacy learning facilities for the ordinary citizens who were unable to read and write or unable to attend schools at their early age. Communities halls were build under the World Bank and UNESCO grants in every villages and small town to accommodate these schools and other activities in relation with educational and social activities. All these were evidences that the new Independent Malaysian government was very concerned of the educational development especially in relation to ability to read and write of our citizens at the early days of this nation.

The concept of literacy skills as the ability to read and write went virtually unchallenged in our educational setting until recently. The development of new technology revolution and multimedia reforms in the world has change the scenery of classrooms literacy instruction in the world from merely reading and writing to a more complicated communication processes and involving new representation of reading texts. Literacy as it is today needs a wider definition that is beyond the limitation of understanding of printed pages. It involves more rigorous activities of communication process such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking. More importantly the process of acquiring new aspect of literacy is to enable it to be used in a wide variety of purposes (social, technical and aesthetic purposes), for a wide variety of audiences, and a wide variety of situations (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). At this limelight, the term functional literacy comes to the scenery of literacy instructions in language classrooms all over the world.

**Functional Literacy**

Mahzan Arshad (2003) discussion was on more holistic definition of literacy to indicate the level of competence, which enables the literate individual to function independently and flexibly in many areas of life or in a term known as functional literacy. This broader definition indicates that literacy is not just the main business of learning to read and write and certain aspect of language knowledge such as grammatical rules and regulations, but also more importantly how literacy skills can be used in the aspect of living functionally and coping in school and community surrounding them in real life situations.

For example, the finding from one of Mahzan Arshad (2001) research in literacy shows an improvement in literacy achievement and applications among primary school students who attended the experimental treatment in holistic approach of teaching Malay language art. Students were able to make connections, more willing to participate in classroom activities, willing to try new endeavor in learning, and making learning fun and exciting. Are all these good sign of learning happened in most literacy classrooms in our nation are yet to be answers.

In the recent study, literacy involvement is to show interest in participating in literacy activities like shared reading, collaborative and cooperative writing, thinking aloud, responding to literature, story telling and narrating were usually expected to happen in a more holistic literacy classrooms. Holistic literacy involvement according to Mahzan Arshad (2003) is the ability to integrate language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and thinking in the process of acquiring language and literacy skills.

Functional literacy means ability of individual to use his or her mind set to be able to meaningfully used reading and writing ability in his or her everyday life. Therefore, to help students develop and acquire literacy skills, teachers need to integrate these skills as they help on another in developing their language skills. According to Rosenblatt (1978), while reading, a reader will move in between the two continuums, efferent and aesthetics, and finally will stop at a point. At this point, the reader will make his or her stance, as a result of reading. Efferent is reading for the purpose of developing skills or to gather information. Readers will focus on information that can be acquired
from the text. Where as aesthetics is reading for the purpose to develop aesthetic value through the language used by the writer. Focus of reader are on the figurative language, image, feeling and emotional arise from reading a text.

**Literacy Learning**

The true nature of literacy learning is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, involving attitudes, assumptions and expectations. It is a social and cultural achievement, and individual’s intellectual accomplishment for some. Teachers often make the assumption that through repeated reading of textbooks, workbooks and classroom tests, students will learn to read and write and acquire the language skills taught in classrooms. There are others aspect of language learning than often being overlooked by teachers, such as individual differences, cultural background, home environment, and linguistic ability of each and individual student in the classroom that may influence language performance. Therefore the purpose of this study is to add to the understanding of the factors for underachievers in literacy and making used of the finding to meet the solutions of the problems.

When we discussed the concept of literacy learning and helping students to develop literacy skills, we often being reminded of how we were being taught language arts few years or decades ago. The language arts classes will be subdivided into five or six periods for the each week and on each day language teacher would focused on one aspect of language skill that need to be taught in the week. Classes would begin with teachers explaining to student the focus of language lesson for the day. The activities than would been carried out according to the focus of the day.

Literacy skills have always being taught as separate components and some as separate subjects. However, in real life situation all aspects of literacy develop simultaneously and interactively. Students will learn to read and write by simply reading and writing, and responding to their reading and writing (Strickland, 1990). Thus literacy develops as students encountered many authentic or real literacy experiences in which they are able to approximate the real task of literacy. In other words, children learn to read, write, speak, listen and think by having real opportunity to read, write, speak, listen, and think as opposed to completing contrived exercises that involve marking, circling, and underlining (Cooper, 1993). We focused our recent study by looking at whether or not students in literacy classes in Malaysia were given the opportunity to be involved in real literacy experiences as stated by Cooper.

**The Principles of Literacy Teaching in a Multiethic Society**

There are seven principles that need to be discussed in relation to literacy teaching in language arts classrooms and its application in literacy activities in a multiethnic classroom:

1. Literacy involves interpretation. Writers and readers participates in double acts of interpretation – the writer interprets the world (events, experiences, ideas, and so on), and the reader then interprets the writers interpretation in terms of his or her own conception of the world. Different cultural background may need different approaches in the process of learning and teaching in term of content and materials used.

2. Literacy involves collaboration. Writers write for an audience, even if they write for themselves. Their decisions about what must be said, and what can go without saying, are based on their understanding of their audience. Readers in turn must contribute their motivation, knowledge, and experience in order to make the writer’s text meaningful. Self-interpretation is important to make sense of texts and own voices are important to make others to understand them differently.
3. Literacy involves conventions. How people read and write texts is not universal, but governed by cultural conventions that evolve through use and are modified for individual purposes. Different cultural background may give different perspective of the same texts. Cultural sensitivity is an art of teaching in a multi ethnic society because without it may unnecessary tensions among children in the classroom.

4. Literacy instruction should involved cultural, historical knowledge and social interaction. Reading and writing function within particular systems of attitudes, beliefs, customs, ideals, and values. Readers and writers operating from outside a given cultural system risk misunderstanding or being misunderstood by those operating on the inside of cultural system. Student should not only been thought on how to comprehend reading materials, but they must also be able to interpret those materials according to the environment near to them.

5. Literacy lesson should involved problem solving and social context. This is because words are always embedded in linguistic and situational contexts, reading and writing involve figuring out relationships between words, between larger units of meaning, and between texts and real imagined worlds. Words may change in meaning according to different cultural context.

6. Literacy learning involves reflection and self-reflection. Reader and writers think about language and its relation to the world and themselves. They might not be able to understand specific word or phrases, but holistically they may understand certain word or phrases according to specific context that near to them. Thus, literacy materials should reflect the culture and environment from which the students come from.

7. Literacy involves language use in various situation and environment. Literacy is not just about knowing to read and write, nor just about lexical and grammatical knowledge. It requires knowledge of how language is used in spoken and written contexts to create discourse. It is about how people use verbal and written communication to interact with each other in appropriate environment.

The seven-point linkage between literacy skills has important implications for the processes of language arts teaching and learning. In the teaching of reading and writing students not only learning about vocabulary and grammar but also about discourse and the processes by which language is created and used. They learned to deal with communications, interpersonal relationship in communications, and the social aspects language used. They also learn alternative ways of expressing themselves in social contexts and ways in which cultural affects their used of language. Literacy therefore not only relevant for students to learn reading and writing, but essential for all language skills involved in human communications.

CONCLUSION

These dimensions of literacy learning is not only applies in learning first or native language, but also very crucial in learning a second language. Almost all Malaysians secondary school students learn English and Arabic as a second language. Even though Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) has been taught in school curriculum as a first language, but most of the other students who are not from the Malay ethnic learn the language as the second language. The aspect of communication plays important part in the process of teaching and learning all these languages at secondary school levels. The seven-point principle applied broadly to communications skills, and provides a bridge to span the gap that so often draws by teachers in teaching language arts in our secondary school students due to the need to fulfill the requirement of the public examinations format.
REFERENCES


