

# THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL ATTITUDES ON LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AMONGST INDIGENOUS YOUNG SEMAI CHILDREN

Rosline Sandai (Ph.D)<sup>1</sup>, Che Ton Mahmud (Ph.D)<sup>2</sup>  
Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia  
rosline@fbk.upsi.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

Cultural attitudes are beliefs and practices of a group of people; they define the culture in determining appropriateness for its culture. This paper highlights the influence of cultural attitudes on language development of indigenous young Semai children from Malaysia. The research examines the influence of parents' interactions with their children and their sharing culture practices on the children's first and second language development. Findings showed that young Semai children were reluctant to speak the second language, which is the Malay language, after nearly a year of attending a national kindergarten in their village. This is perhaps due to the fact that all parents spoke Semai language to their children all the time. However, it must be noted that their interactions were substantially imperative in nature instructing the children to follow parental orders. Casual discussion of other topics was non-existent. Nor did parents ever read or tell stories to their children; they admitted to not knowing any stories in Semai language. Parents have also hardly encouraged their children to learn other languages. They have no confidence in their children's ability in speaking Malay as a second language. The exclusiveness of sharing culture practices between adults and children is prominent among the Semai. The children are encouraged to share their space and toys but they are to play by themselves. The research concludes that cultural attitudes in Semai community have slowed down the development of the first and second language of their young children.

**Key words:** cultural attitudes, first language development, second language acquisition, childrearing practices, sharing culture, Indigenous communities.

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity plays an important role in today's globalized world as culture is seen as an essential element of sustainable development particularly on early childhood development. However, the task of educating young indigenous children in their own language and cultures has become a diverted focus in most plural societies that practice standard mainstream early childhood education. As such, minority indigenous cultures and languages have been given very little attention in most national curriculum of early childhood education. The medium of instruction is also usually in a nation's official language, which is not the children's first language. This situation poses a challenge in helping indigenous young children to acquire a second language as their mastery in the first language is not attended to. Consequently, children's first language competency which depends on childrearing patterns and cultural practices may not be a straight forward transfer of registration in second language learning.

Research has emphasised the role of language in the development of thinking and literacy in young children. Bouffler (1992) reviewed research in bilingualism and concluded that children

cannot develop their thought processes until they are familiar with the vocabulary and structures of their own languages. They need language to think. Furthermore, the development and strengthening of a child's first language is an important step in the acquisition of the second language. In fact, inadequate development and insufficient reinforcement of the first language may in turn diminish the competency of the second language as well as affect cognitive functioning and academic achievement (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1976).

In the context of this research, cultural attitudes refer to beliefs and practices related to childrearing and communal sharing concepts of self-identity through childrearing practices and communal sharing among the Semai, an indigenous group from Malaysia. Similar to many other indigenous cultures, oral tradition plays an important role in Semai communities in which various indigenous knowledge and practices are passed orally by word of mouth from one generation to another. The informal learning on indigenous knowledge and culture by young children thus depends largely on oral interactions with adults and observations of cultural activities in their surroundings. The second language learning for Semai young children starts when they attend the national kindergarten in the village. It is in this kindergarten that they are exposed to Malay as a second language. The research was conducted to examine the influence of cultural attitudes on language development of Semai young children.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

There were ten (four to five year old) young Semai children enrolled in the national kindergarten in 2013. However, only seven children attended class regularly throughout the year. The children were observed for a few times in November 2013, and these children had then attended the kindergarten for nearly a year. The Malay language is the official language of Malaysia and it is the medium of instruction for all national educational institutions including pre-schools. However, it was observed that the young Semai children in the kindergarten preferred to speak Semai than Malay language in the classroom. They even responded to their teacher in Semai when they were spoken to in Malay language. In most situations, they would prefer to respond non-verbally using body language instead of responding verbally using the Malay language.

The Semai belongs to the indigenous group in Malaysia known as *Orang Asli* and they live mostly in the centre of Peninsula Malaysia. They are known for their non-violence and they speak Semai, a Mon-Khmer language. This research was conducted in Chinggun village, Perak where about 400 Semai live closely together comprising around 90 families. A third of the total population are young children and adolescents. The village has a national kindergarten for young children aged four to five years. The children are allowed to attend kindergarten for one or two years.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The aim of the research was to investigate the influence of childrearing practices and sharing culture on young Semai children's first and second language development. Parents of the young children were interviewed on their childrearing practices and sharing culture. The focus is on parents' language when they interact orally with their children in order to develop appropriate behaviour. Parents' attitudes in speaking and teaching home language to their children as well as

their attitudes toward their children's ability in learning a second language were included. In addition, the research investigated the concept of sharing culture among the Semai as sharing culture plays an important role in indigenous communal lives.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study involves semi structured interviews to gather data from each parent of the seven young children who studied in the national kindergarten. The interview protocol centres around two areas of information which are (i) childrearing practices which includes parents' attitudes in speaking and teaching Semai language to their children and their attitudes toward children's ability in learning other languages, and (ii) sharing culture practices which encompass children sharing habits during play and parent's interference during conflicts (which arise for not sharing) among young children.

Six parents were interviewed and one of the parents has twin girls attending the class. The parents comprised three fathers (P1, P2 and P3) aged between late 20's to early 40's. Two mothers (P4 and P5) are in their 20's and the third one (P6) is in her mid 30's. All parents got married before they turned eighteen. The three fathers and only one mother completed primary education. The other two mothers left secondary schools when they were fifteen years old.

Parents and young children were also observed during a few informal visits to their village. The observations focused on (i) parents' oral interactions with their children and (ii) sharing culture practices among adults and children as well as parent's interference when children had conflicts due to not sharing when they played.

## **FINDINGS**

**Cultural Attitudes in Childrearing Practices Among Semai Parents** Child rearing practices reflect qualities and abilities that people use to bring up their younger generations and to define themselves as a group of people. Interview questions in the current research focussed on parents' childrearing practice related to their oral interactions with their children.

The parents were asked on language they used and topics of their conversations with their children. They also provided information on language they used to praise or to punish their children. They were also asked to give opinions on the ability of their children in learning other languages.

### **Language and Topics of Conversations**

Results show that all parents speak Semai language to their children all the time. One mother (P5) who marries a Malay said that she speaks Semai to her child all the time but the father speaks to the child in Malay. The child in turn speaks to both of them in Semai. Two parents (P1 and P6) said that they spoke a few words of Malay, mostly in the form of verbs that are used as directives.

P1: *..Kadang-kadang saya cakap 'makan' dalam bahasa Melayu dan tak cakap 'chacha' dalam Semai, jalan-jalan dan bukan 'chichip', 'tidur' dan bukan 'biat'* [sometimes I said 'makan'[eat]

in Malay instead of 'chacha' in Semai... 'jalan-jalan' [In Malay means go for a walk] instead of 'chichip' [walk in Semai]... 'tidur' [sleep in Malay] instead of 'biat' [sleep in Semai].

P6: ..*Saya cakap 'jangan' kalau dia nakal dan 'tak boleh' kalau dia minta duit* [I say 'jangan' [don't- in Malay] if the children are naughty and 'tak ada' [don't have- in Malay] when the children ask for money.

When the parents were asked on the topics they talked about with the children, most of them were unable to respond spontaneously. Four of them (P2, P3, P4, P5,) said 'macam-macam' or 'a lot of things' but they did not specify and elaborate on what they usually talk about with their children. Two parents (P1 and P6) mentioned the following:

P1: *Kami cakap pasal program di TV* [We talked about some programs on TV].

P6: *Saya tanya apa dia buat di sekolah* [I asked what he did in school].

However, all parents reiterate that they often give directives to their children to forbid them from doing something. Some examples of the directives are 'don't play in the river', 'don't play outside the house', and 'don't play far from the house'. Other directives are telling children to do things immediately such as to eat their meals or to clean themselves. P3 mentioned that the children would follow their parents' orders but if they refused to comply, the parents would normally allow them to have their own ways.

The researcher noticed that there was hardly any literacy related activities in all participants' homes. Only one parent (P4) showed a torn scrapbook that was given by a Christian missionary. The twins scribbled on a few pages in the scrapbook. All parents mentioned that they have never read or tell any stories to the children. The parents also admitted that they do not know any stories in Semai language.

### **Language Used for Praising or Punishing Children**

The parents were asked to elaborate on the language they used to praise or punish their children. Most parents used two Semai words 'bur'[good] and 'penei' [clever] to praise their children. The parents did not use specific words when punishing their children. However, they would scold the children when they were naughty or when they got involved in fights with their friends.

P6: *Saya cakap jangan main kasar dengan kawan kamu atau jangan berkelahi dengan kawan kamu. Saya akan marah juga kalau dia tidak mahu makan* [I said don't play rough with your friends or don't fight with your friends. I will also scold if he doesn't want to eat].

Additionally, parents (P4, P6) do occasionally smack their children on their arms or pinch them lightly as punishment.

### **Parents' Opinions on Children's Ability in Learning Other Languages**

The parents were asked for their opinions on their children's ability in learning other languages. Most of them (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6) said that Malay language is too hard for young children to learn and the children do not like to speak in Malay.

P3: ...*Dia belajar, dia dengar tapi tak berapa suka* [he learns, he listens but doesn't quite like it]. *Dia dengar sajalah sebab dia orang Asli tapi belajar bahasa lain* [He listens only because he is an Orang Asli who is learning other language]. *Jadi dia tak boleh terima* [so he can't accept (learn) it]

P2 believes that the children have no confidence in speaking Malay.

P2: *Mereka hendak cakap agak susah* [they want to speak but is quite difficult], *dia nak cakap tapi takut dia salah* [he wants to speak but he is afraid of making mistakes].

The parents also admitted that they hardly teach any other languages to their children. One parent (P6) said that she only taught her son to count from one to ten in English.

### **Cultural Attitudes in Sharing Culture Among the Semai**

The parents were interviewed firstly on the nature of sharing culture among adults in the village. Secondly, parents were to elaborate on sharing culture among young children which includes sharing of space and toys during play. Thirdly, the parents were asked on their interference to resolve conflicts over problems on sharing.

#### **Nature of Sharing Culture Among the Adults**

Any outsiders who come into a Semai village would easily notice that space is well shared by everyone in the village. The distance between houses is about six to eight feet and there are no fences between the houses. Adults and young children seemed to move freely within the compound of the village.

The Semai adults usually share their food and drink with relatives. They help each other by reciprocal lending of dry food ingredients. The adults also give away old clothes to their needy relatives. They share their space gracefully within the village compound.

Most parents mentioned that the adults in the village always share their food with extended family members and close relatives.

P6: *Kami selalu makan dengan keluarga adik saya. Kadang-kadang saya jemput saudara-mara makan bersama* [We usually eat with my sister's family. Sometimes I invite my relatives for meals].

One parent (P5) said she sometimes gave away old clothes to relatives.

P5: *Saya bagi pakaian lama saya kepada saudara mara yang tidak mampu* [I gave away my old clothes to my needy relatives].

The villagers also help each other in times of need.

P1: Kami selalu saling pinjam meminjam makanan seperti beras dan minyak makan [We always lend each other food like rice and cooking oil].

### **Sharing Culture Among the Children**

All parents mentioned that their children share toys such as bicycles, dolls, and other plastic toys. Some of them bring their friends' toys home and some keep them for good.

P6: *Budak main sama-sama dengan bisikal Hazami* [the children play together with Hazami's bicycle].

P4: *Dia bawa mainan ini dari rumah kawan* [she brought this toy from her friend's house]...*yang ini sudah lama disini* [this one (toy) has been here for a long time].

The parents also stated that the children usually play indoor in each other's houses and also outdoor such as swimming in the river located at the edge of the village.

P6: *Mereka main di depan rumah* [they play in front of the house].

P5: *Budak selalu berenang di sungai* [the children often swim together in the river].

P4: *Mereka baru balik dari sungai, dah letih terus tidur* [they (the twins) just came back from the river, very tired and they slept straight away]. *Meraka jarang di rumah, selalu main dengan kawan* [they hardly stay at home, they always play with friends].

The mothers preferred their children to play with their close relatives and all parents believed that their children do not like to play with other children who are not from the same village.

P1: *Ada saudara saya kahwin dengan orang India* [I have a relative who got married to an Indian], *mereka bawa anak datang kampong tapi anak-anak saya tidak mahu bermain dengan mereka walaupun mereka saling kenal* [they brought their children to the village but my children did not want to play with them even though they know each other].

Most parents encouraged their children to share their toys and play together. However, if conflicts arise due to problems with sharing, parents normally confiscate their toys away or scold the children. For example:

P1: *Saya akan marah mereka 'Main sama-sama!' dan 'jangan kedekut dengan orang!'* [I will scold them 'Play together!' and 'Don't be stingy with others!'].  
to others!].

P4: *Saya kata 'Jangan berebut'* [I said 'dont fight over it(toy)!'].  
it(toy)!].

P6: *Saya akan simpan mainan itu dan saya akan marah 'main sama-sama!'* [I will put the toys away and I will scold them 'Play together!'].  
Play together!].

Sharing among Semai children is thus usually seen during play time. The children shared their toys and space in each other's house. Most parents also encouraged sharing among their children. In addition, during the interview sessions in participants' houses, the researcher noticed that children always seem to play among themselves without much interaction with adults. It seems that sharing among the Semai is exclusive within adults and children groups, but is not common between adults and children.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Cultural Attitudes in Childrearing Practices Among Semai Parents**

The findings show that all parents spoke Semai language to their children all the time. Some parents used a few words of Malay as directives to guide their children towards developing positive behaviours. Parents seem to give more directives than talking about other topics during the interactions with their children. In addition, it was noted that there were no literacy related activities in all participants' houses. It was found that all parents did not read any stories to their children and they also do not know any stories in Semai language.

The parents used words such as 'good' and 'clever' to praise their children but no specific words were used to punish the children. However, they would scold their children in directive forms that forbid the children from doing unaccepted behaviours.

As for parents' opinions on their children's ability in learning other languages, most parents showed little confidence in their children's competency. The parents believed that the Malay language is too difficult for young Semai children. They also believed that the children have no confidence in speaking Malay language. Most parents also revealed that they did not teach their children to speak other languages.

The findings on cultural attitudes in childrearing practice among the Semai parents show that there are limited interactions between adults and children in encouraging the educational process. Thus it is evident that essential parental guidance at this stage has been overlooked. It has been argued that children can only develop their thought process after they are familiar with the vocabulary and structure of their own language (Bouffler, 1992). The early period of life is the prime time for children's literacy development, hence the child's home environment is very important. Schickedanz (1986) stated that:

In an important sense, the child's literacy development does not have an independent existence; it is constructed in the interactions between the child and those persons around him...In fact, the process of natural literacy development hinges upon the experience the child has in reading and writing activities, which are mediated by literate adults, older siblings or events in a child's everyday life... (p.4).

The impact of young children's experience on their later development is quite obvious, theoretically and experimentally. Piaget (1977) stated that the stages of intellectual development are invariant. Thus, the quality of the succeeding stage is determined by the proceeding stage. The skills and knowledge acquired at one stage determine the readiness for the next stage; early deficits and failures inevitably prejudice later learning in a cumulative way. Furthermore,

Skutnabb-Kangas (1976) pointed out that it is important to strengthen a child's first language before she or he acquires a second language. Concomitantly, the parenting patterns of Semai parents thus could deprive young children of rich language interactions that encourage literacy knowledge in children's first language.

When children are frequently talked to in the form of directives, they do not participate in meaningful activities that require them to think. Vygotsky (1962) believed that children need to be able to talk about a new problem or a new concept in order to understand it and use it. Adults supply language that fit children's needs at a particular stage or in response to a particular problem. Language is a part of routinised situations. As the child gradually internalises the language that is first supplied by an adult, the problem and a routine task that helps in solving the problem become the child's own. Piaget (1977) also supported that the persons most qualified to help children solve a problem and move to the next stage of intellectual development are those who have just done so themselves.

It has been suggested that children who are three, four and five years old continue to refine meaning making strategies that they begin using when they are toddlers and two-year-olds (McGee & Richgels, 1990). Children expand their meaning-making strategies by being able to understand more story texts as it is read aloud (Magee & Sutton-Smith, 1983). Martinez (1983) also found out that four-year-olds in group story telling can construct many kinds of meaning. They understand what the author says-the literal meaning. They understand what the author implied-inferential meaning, and they make judgements about what the author says-evaluative meanings. When parents do not read or tell stories to their young children particularly stories in the first language, the children are being deprived of opportunities in learning to make inferences about the implied meanings, to predict about upcoming events, and to evaluate the story meaning based on their knowledge of the real world. These learning processes are important in enhancing children's mastery in their first language.

### **Cultural Attitudes in Sharing Culture Among the Semai Adults and Children**

The Semai adults often share food and drink with their close relatives and are generous to their needy relatives. They also lend each other food ingredients in times of need. The children are encouraged to share toys as well as space outdoor and indoor within the village. However, there were limited interactions among adults and children in the sharing of culture. The adults interact among themselves while sharing food and drink whereas the children are to share their toys and play with their friends. Children's experience in sharing culture may have partially contributed to the lack of interest in interacting with their teachers in the kindergarten particularly in speaking Malay language with the teacher.

Bronfenbrenner (1990) stated that the family environment provided for children has a powerful effect on them. He emphasised the importance of reciprocal activity on a regular basis over an extended period in a child's life with whom the child develops strong bond with. Vygotsky (1978) postulated that human knowledge is derived from culture. Ideas are experienced through observations, instructions from others, and firsthand experience all of which are embedded in a particular social and cultural context and often presented in language form.

It has been argued that inadequate development and deficient reinforcement of children's first language may weaken the competency of their second language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1976). Research has also suggested that a bilingual program should delay the teaching of the second language until a sufficient level of competency in the first language has been reached to guarantee the development of threshold competence in the first language (Cummins, 1976; Swan & Cummins, 1979). The national kindergarten perhaps should consider integrating the teaching of children's first language in the curriculum before teaching them the Malay language.

## CONCLUSION

Children's level of mastery in their first language influences their competency in second language development. The adequate development of the first language could enhance the development of thinking and literacy in young children. Literal oral language ability and meta-linguistic awareness are requisite for the promotion of literacy and academic success. As initial language learning is a socially interactive process which is closely bound up with family life, there is a need to advocate for young Semai children to receive positive and constructive experiences at home so that their potentials can be fully developed given an appropriate environment. Mainstream early childhood education perhaps could incorporate children's first language and parenting programs so to promote parents' knowledge as well as awareness for a more effective childrearing patterns.

Young Semai children's first and second language development is influenced by cultural attitudes in parenting patterns and sharing culture. Oral interactions between parents and young children were mostly in the form of directives for guiding children's proper behaviours. The parents never read any stories to their children and hardly encourage their children to learn other languages. The exclusiveness of sharing culture between adults and children is prominent among the Semai. Children are encouraged to share their toys and play by themselves. The sharing culture may have partially influenced young children's behaviours in the kindergarten where they prefer to play by themselves and communicate to each other only in Semai language. As such, cultural attitudes have an impact in slowing down the language development among the young Semai children

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