

# ENHANCING IBAN CHILDREN'S EMERGENT LITERACY AND CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

The study developed a community-based education programme so as to empower Iban parents to assist preschoolers learning Iban oral tradition and acquiring literacy in the Iban language. Ethnographic case study was employed as the research design of the study, utilizing three core instruments of observations, interviews and parents' diaries. Three books written in the form of rhymes were used as the reading materials for the community-based education programme. The findings of the study showed that all parents and preschoolers liked the three books and parents perceived that the books were suitable for preschoolers aged five to six years old. The incorporation of attractive pictures and figurative language made the books more acceptable to the preschoolers and their parents. The parents were competent in delivering the programme, they emphasised three types of literacy activities, namely reading aloud, drawing and writing. The programme enhanced the children's emergent literacy through the interaction of six elements in decoding and comprehension; these included oral language, phonemic awareness, concept of print, letter-sound association, analogy, and a way to think about words. It also enhanced preschoolers' interest in augury and myth but their awareness of the oral tradition was not prominent in the findings.

**Keywords:** rhymes, indigenous, traditional literature, emergent literacy, cultural awareness

## INTRODUCTION

### Intervention in Language Development in Early Childhood

Interventions in early years have the potential to offset many negative trends in later years of children's lives and to provide young children with more opportunities and better outcomes especially in terms of access to education and quality of learning. Language development in early childhood is intertwined with other domains such as cognitive development and social-emotional development in children's overall development. Therefore, it has been perceived as a window of opportunity for intervention in early years. Vygotsky (1986) stated that language is the most powerful tool in the development of any human being, and that a good grasp of language is synonymous with a sound ability to think.

Language development is also one of the dimensions of children's school readiness. Verbal language and emergent literacy are the two components of language development in determining children's school readiness (Kagan, Moore & Bredekamp, 1995). Verbal language skills are listening, speaking, social use of language such as using social conventions and manners, and spoken vocabulary. Emergent literacy includes children's interest in books and stories, emergent writing which is scribbling to imitate writing, print awareness and sequencing.

The study intervened in the language development of Iban preschoolers through a community-based education programme which uses three books on rhymes in Iban language. Children's parents or

guardians were to read these books to the preschoolers. This intervention came as a recommendation from a situational analysis that identified problems related to childrearing practices and literacy development in young Iban children (Sandai, 2007). There is a need to advocate for young Iban children to receive positive and constructive experiences at home so that their potentials can be fully developed given an appropriate environment. Literacy (at least to be familiar with print and its functions) in children's first language should be promoted as a prerequisite for school. Moreover, children's emergent literacy should be taught based on their culture and indigenous knowledge.

There are many types of traditional literature among the Iban and a lot of the oral literature is in the form of rhymes. They include *Jerita tuai* (myth and legends), *Sampi* (prayers), *Pengap* (invocation to deities), *Timang* (songs/poems of praise)/ *Ensera* (song epics or sagas), *Renong* (war narrative songs/entertainment songs), *Pantun* (saying, adage, parable, simile for entertainment), *Sabak* (lamentation poem for the dead), *Biau* (prayers during offering ceremony), *Ramban* (poetic love songs), *Pelian* (rites for healing rituals), *Entelah* (puzzles/riddles), *Sugi* (deities epic) and *Pengarap tuai* (traditional belief system).

Some of these oral traditions are still practiced while some are not because there are no longer any elderly experts to conduct them. Furthermore, many Iban have moved to urban areas to study or to work in government and private sectors since the 1950s. Consequently, apprenticeships in oral tradition from the elderly are becoming more difficult or impossible to take place in Iban traditional domicile known as the longhouse, and the Iban traditional literature is heading towards the margin of extinction. The research thus presented a strategy to impart traditional knowledge on Augury Myths through three children's books that were written in the form of rhymes. These books were developed for enhancing children's emergent literacy and their awareness of Iban oral tradition. The adults read the books with young children so as to disseminate culture and for children to interact with literacy through oral language.

Augury is essentially a system of divination where divine guidance is sought in natural events, particularly in the behavior of birds and other natural species. One book focuses on the interpretation of the calls and flight of the seven augury birds namely *Ketupung* (Rufouspiculet), *Beragai* (Scarlet-rumped Trogon), *Pangkas* (Maroon Woodpecker), *Embuas* (Banded Kingfisher), *Bejampung* (Crested Jay), *Kelabu Papau Senabung* (Diards Trogon), and *Nendak* (White-rumped Shama).

The substance of most Iban myths is expressed in the prose form of *Jerita tuai* ((traditional belief system) and *Pengap* (invocation to deities). It is believed that Iban mythology links the 'palpable untruth' of the myths proper, the possible factual basis of certain legends, and the empirical truth of Iban history (Jensen, 1974). The other two books include the important myths of principal spirits such as *Sengalang Burung* (the God of War and of general surveillance for Iban welfare) and *Simpulang Gana* (the God of the Paddy Cult and Tutelary Diety of the Soil).

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

This study grew out of the researcher's concern over the deterioration of Iban traditional lifestyles over the years as well as the problem of many Iban not being able to cope with the fast changing contemporary cultural contexts. The changes have affected all members in the community for better or for worse either directly or indirectly.

In educational development, there are more Iban students enrolled in formal education each year but there is also a high dropout rate among primary and secondary students. Furthermore, Iban educational attainment has been recorded as being the lowest among the ethnic groups in Sarawak since 1950 (Jawan, 1994). As reported in the 2002 state survey (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2003), Iban students who had completed all levels of education only constituted 21% of the total student population in Sarawak. It was also found that Iban students constituted only 25% of the total number of all students who completed primary six. The Malays and Chinese were 30% and 40% respectively.

At secondary school level, Iban students constituted 17% of the total number of students compared to Malays at 33% and the Chinese at about 44%. As for tertiary level, the distribution of Sarawakians with a minimum of bachelor's degree is: Chinese (45%); Malay (28%); Iban (18%); and others (9%). In addition, the Iban scored the lowest literacy rate of 39% below the state average of 55% as compared to other ethnic groups in the 2000 survey of literacy (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2001). Their low educational attainment was also found to coincide with their level of literacy.

In the 2002 Sarawak state statistics on literacy, it was reported that 28% of the Iban have never attended school compared to 13% of the Malay, 25% of the Bidayuh, 22% of the Melanau, and 7% of the Chinese. Out of the total number of Iban who never attended school, 9% were aged between 5 and 19 years. The percentage of Iban who have attended primary education was 45%. 43% of them attended secondary education, and 5% attended tertiary education. Though there are weaknesses in the latest statistical evidence which is partially due to the Iban having been classified under the 'Dayak' group along with two other groups—the Bidayuh and Orang Ulu, it is still reasonable to assert that the Iban continue to lag behind in education development.

Additionally, the welfare of most young children in poor families is often neglected. These children are sometimes treated as mini adults. Iban parents also take pride in their children being self-sufficient and not in need of adult guidance from an early age. These unrealistic expectations may also contribute to the limited parental involvement in assisting young children with their activities in preschools or schools, and the high dropout rate among Iban students.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The aims of the study was to develop a community-based education programme so as to empower Iban parents to assist young children learning Iban oral tradition and acquiring literacy in Iban language. The programme was also to promote the development of their thinking skills as well as to cultivate a strong interest in their families, communities, traditional values and culture. Specifically, the objectives of the study were:

- i. to investigate the suitability of a series of books developed on Iban oral tradition for five-six year old Iban preschoolers;
- ii. to identify to what extent parents were able to deliver the programme;
- iii. to examine if the programme enhanced children's emergent literacy; and
- iv. to examine if the programme enhanced children's awareness of Iban oral tradition.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach through a combination of case study and ethnographic research designs. Data in the study were obtained via observing children's emergent literacy in Iban language and their awareness of Iban oral tradition when they were reading the books with their parents or guardians. Parents' teaching strategies were also observed. Parents were instructed to keep diaries on the nature and frequency of children's behaviours when they looked at or read the books as well as note any other related behaviours during the three month intervention. The Iban preschoolers and their parents were therefore the units of analysis.

The subjects were three five year olds and three six year olds. Each child had at least one adult as a secondary participant who was either one of his/her parents, siblings or grandparents. The number of subjects in this study was relatively 'small' as the study intended to get the deepest understanding possible of the single situation. Five to six year olds were chosen for the study because children within this age group are often much more confident, adventurous, and usually love to experiment with words. They are also beginning to understand reason and to manage their feelings (Nixon & Aldwinckle, 1999). These children also had never been to a playschool.

The study utilised participant observation, semi structured interviews and parents' diaries as the data collection techniques in order to obtain a richer data especially on the children and parents' opinions on the books. The observations were intended to record the ways parents read the three books to their children, the manner in which they interacted with their children when they gave instructions, assessing their children's understanding of the books and reinforcing new knowledge to their children. On the other hand, the children were observed on the ways they reacted to their parents when their parents were reading to them, the manners they tried to understand the language and content of the books, and their interests in the books. Observations were recorded in anecdotes.

Parents or guardians were also interviewed two weeks after they read each book to the children. Seven questions were asked to get their opinions on parts of the story and pictures that they liked, reasons for favouring the book as reading material, how beneficial each book was perceived to be to the Iban, and ways to improve the book. The parents or guardians were interviewed for the fifth time at the end of the three month intervention which was after they had read all the books to the children. Five questions were asked to find out the suitability of the books as reading materials; whether the books had enhanced children's emergent literacy and their knowledge of the Iban culture; parents' perceptions of their own competency as teachers; and other opinions they wished to share.

The parents were asked to tick the thirteen statements that indicated children's responses to ways they wanted the books read to them, their interest in the contents or pictures, and ways they related the books to other children or people in the longhouse. There were five other statements for parents to take note of children's feelings and behaviours in regards to their reading activities.

Triangulation has been used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data collected in any particular study. It can take many forms but most often, it involves either the use of multiple sources or different data collection strategies. In this study for instance, data collected during observing children's verbal responses or reactions were cross-checked with data obtained from written activities like drawing and writing, which in turn, were further cross-checked with interviews with parents. These processes are

necessary to test the objectivity of the data. The findings from the variety of data collection methods used, if not consistent or in agreement with each other, implies insufficiency. Furthermore, the within method's triangulation was achieved via obtaining and cross-checking the information from adult participants (parents) on the understanding of their young children on the content of the books and children's awareness on augury, myths and legends as well as literacy. The between method's triangulation, on the other hand, was carried out via comparing data from observations of parents and children with that gathered through interviews as well as through the children's performance in oral and written activities.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Suitability of the Books**

From the feedback obtained through the interviews, it was clear that the books are suitable for the preschoolers or young children mainly because they managed to strike the balance between visual appeal and content awareness (on language and story). Both the participants and parents liked the books and indicated that they did not encounter problems using them. However, as stated by some of the parents, it would be good if the books are read by adults to the children so that both parties can learn simultaneously. This would enhance the children's understanding of the Iban culture and language. It is thus interesting to note the parents were eager to share the story as they felt it was part of their responsibility to spread the knowledge of their own culture.

All children and their parents liked the stories and pictures in the three books. Their preferences on the pictures differed but most of them liked pictures of the augury birds. Parents thought that the books were suitable for five to six years old children but one parent suggested the books were better for older children as they could read the book by themselves. Children could follow the stories and understand the language used in the books. One parent also commented that the language was difficult in some parts of the books because classical language was used in the rhymes. However, he added that it was unavoidable as classical language is always used in Iban oral tradition and he thought the language was beautiful.

### **Types of Literacy Activities Done During the Delivery of the Programme**

From the data collected during the three-months of observations, interviews and parent's diaries, three emerging types of literacy activities using the three books were noted in the parents' delivery of the programme were:

- i. Reading aloud – reading out loud together with the children;
- ii. Writing – teaching their children how to write certain words; and
- iii. Drawing – drawing pictures of key characters with the children.

Reading aloud and writing were two common activities done at home using the given books. Drawing, however, was one activity done by some parents to stimulate their children's interest.

## **Factors Affecting Parents' Delivery of the Programme**

During the observations, the parents were very confident in delivering the programme though some encountered minor problems. Nevertheless, it was pivotal to get an account of their views on factors that could affect their delivery of the programme. From the interview data analysed, three key factors were mentioned by the parents:

- i. Lack of literacy resources;
- ii. Low educational level; and
- iii. Insufficient cultural knowledge.

The parents were worried that there was an obvious lack of resources for literacy activities in the long house. Apart from the three books and stationery provided by the researcher, the children had practically no other literacy resources available. While the children could keep on reading the same three books over and over again, the lack of reading materials is a serious concern and it is likely to hinder their literacy development and learning as a whole. This was perhaps why the parents were very grateful towards the researcher for providing the necessary books and materials for the programme.

In addition, some parents viewed their low educational level as a barrier in helping their children to develop their literacy skills. One mother for example, was illiterate, causing her problems in reading with her son. Luckily, the older sister was available to help out. Low educational level also prevented them from explaining certain words to their children. At times, the parents struggled to define words and that caused confusion among some of the children.

The parents also mentioned that their knowledge of Iban culture was insufficient. This factor affected their delivery of the programme as well. For instance, a mother stated how she could read the books provided but could not understand the meanings behind some of the augury or myth. Parents with vast experience on the Iban culture such as a grandfather in his late 60s could retell the story in a more convincing and dramatic manner as they had more information to share.

## **The Programme in Enhancing Children's Emergent Literacy**

Throughout the three observations, the researcher noted that all six participants were slowly improving their literacy skills especially writing. They were generally more active in writing towards the end of the programme. The blank exercise books provided to them were filled with more words. In fact, their writings were more comprehensible as compared to the beginning of the programme.

Similarly, in terms of reading, most of the time was spent reading the books together with their parents or guardian. All six children preferred their parents to read it out loud for them to follow. This somehow improved their pronunciation of the Iban words and at the same time helped them learn the meaning of the words

The researcher noted similar patterns among other parents. As mentioned earlier, they depended heavily on reading aloud technique. The children enjoyed listening to their parents narrating the story of each book and they did not just keep quiet. They tended to ask questions when the content attracted their interests. Most of the time, the researcher observed how the children would learn from their parents. Parents' sufficient scaffolding proved to be crucial in helping their children to develop necessary

literacy skills especially on their phonemic awareness and letter-sound association. This showed that the community-based education programme has the potential for enhancing children's emergent literacy development.

### **The Programme In Enhancing Children's Awareness of Augury and Myth**

A thorough scrutiny of the observation data revealed that the participants were very keen to learn about their culture. They were curious in wanting to know more about each of the underlying stories behind the augury and myth presented in the books. However, the researcher noticed that they still lack awareness of these cultural aspects. They could not relate to the story as part of their culture. They were like foreigners looking into an alien culture. Some of them would mention all those names in the books but when probed further, they would say they did not understand the meaning of the cultural figures such as the significance of each bird in *Beburung*. This situation is understandable considering that the parents themselves did not possess the necessary cultural background knowledge needed for them to explain to their children.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings from the study have shown that the three books produced for the purpose of the community-based education programme are suitable for the target group which is preschoolers aged 5 to 6 years old. The incorporation of attractive pictures and figurative language has made the books well-accepted by the participants and their parents. As noted by Senechal and LeFevre (2002), reading materials targeted to young children should be appealing enough for them to pick up and read. Without such motivation, the aim of using the materials for developing their literacy skills would be pointless.

All of the six children enjoyed the three books, which were written in the form of rhymes, being read to them by their parents or guardians. Towards the end of the three months, a few children could recognise some letters and words from the books. McGee and Richgels (1990) stated that beginners in learning literacy do not make the connection between sounds and letters but they do learn something about oral language that will help them to discover the relation between letter and sound at a later period. In addition, children's ability to create rhyming words emerges from their earlier experience with nursery rhymes or other reading materials with language play. A lot of Iban oral literature is in the form of rhymes. Early literacy intervention with rhymes in the Iban language is thus suitable for their age as well as enhancing their mastery of natural indigenous language.

The second research question of the study dealt with the ability of the parents to deliver the community-based education programme. The findings presented earlier showed the various attempts by the parents to develop their children's literacy skills using various activities based on the three books; these included reading aloud, writing and drawing. During the interviews, it emerged that parents emphasized the importance of reading in general. Previous researchers have had similar views on the importance of reading to children. Farver, Xu, Eppe, and Lonigan (2006) claimed that reading to young children promotes language acquisition and correlates with literacy development and later on with achievement in reading comprehension and overall success in school. Furthermore, the research literature suggests that reading books to young children will develop their listening skills, love for

reading, and extend their vocabulary and knowledge. Above all, children's interest in reading books will be stimulated.

Apart from reading, the parents also emphasised writing and drawing activities as a way to deliver the programme. The parents encouraged the children to copy the story and rewrite certain key words like the names of the birds. This, though simple, can provide a strong motivation for the children to practise writing. As stated by Heath and Taylor (1983) and Rhyner (2009), children learn much about reading and writing by observing the reading and writing that occurs in their families. This is in agreement with Baghban (1989) who argued that with little encouragement, children's reading and writing development will proceed on parallel tracks. He further argued that even a young child who sees the adults in her life writing letters, grocery lists and telephone messages would want to experiment with writing. Looking across the data of the present study, the researcher discovered similar patterns as parents, at times, also facilitated the children's writing by showing them the right way. Hence, it can be concluded that the parents contributed, through their efforts, in delivering the programme effectively to the children.

It is also worth highlighting the factors that the parents claimed had hindered them from delivering the programme better. These problems included: i) lack of literacy resources; ii) low educational level; and iii) insufficient cultural knowledge. These problems, as explained earlier, did not impede the community-based education programme, but the parents felt that they could have made a better impact had these problems been addressed. The problem of the lack of literacy resources in the longhouse is understandable due to the locality of the community in a rural area, as similarly reported by Callewaert and Kallos (1989) and Chiam (1999). This could be solved by requesting the community to set up a mutual fund for purchasing literacy materials like books and stationery. The government and charitable organisations could also lend a hand in solving this problem for the benefit of the community. As for low education levels and insufficient cultural knowledge among the parents, more free training such as that provided as part of this programme, should be conducted. This would provide opportunities for the parents to learn necessary skills and knowledge to help develop their children's emergent literacy and other skills.

The third research question of the study focused on the programme's potential for enhancing children's emergent literacy. The findings revealed that parental involvement is the key to encouraging children to read and write, and to enhancing their literacy skills. In this study, the children constantly requested the parents to read the books to them, thus allowing them to learn. Hiebert and Raphael (1998) suggested that when children participate in reading aloud and other literacy activities with members of their family and communities, they comprehend the functions and meaning of literacy.

This finding also supports Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Alone, a child can only read the words that he or she already knows. The parent can then step in and begin teaching more words to the child. The child is then able to learn more letters and words with parental guidance. This practice of parents teaching words to their child enhances the child's emergent literacy ability. Parents who teach their child to read words are modeling important future reading skills for their child. They are showing their child that words are important and that words are the building blocks to reading.



In addition, children who asked to be read to are initiating a verbal interaction between themselves and their parents. Recalling a shared storybook reading (such as the books on augury) has a direct influence on children's oral vocabulary development (Frijters et al., 2000). It is likely that dialogue increases between parents and children during shared book reading due to children's natural curiosity with new situations offered by storybooks as shown in the findings of this study. Children are exposed to new ideas and new words, which open possibilities for vocabulary enrichment. Therefore, child initiation of book reading is an important link, specifically a significant partial mediator, between the home literacy environment and child emergent literacy.

Parents' informal instruction and the use of the resources also enabled these children to develop six elements, namely; oral language, phonemic awareness, concept of print, letter-sound association, analogy, and a way to think about words, all necessary for becoming independent decoders as initially proposed in the framework of the study.

**i) Oral Language**

During the observations, the young children were seen to acquire oral language first before the written language. They were seen to follow the parents' oral reading and improved on their own as this was reinforced through multiple reading occasions involving the four books. Cooper (2000) noted that children develop various aspects of oral language such as phonology, morphology, semantics, vocabulary and pragmatics which form the foundation for reading skills. The findings supported the notion that the quality of proceeding and succeeding stages of intellectual development are interconnected (Piaget, 1977).

**ii) Phonemic Awareness**

The scaffolding provided by the parents during the reading activities also helped the young children to increase their phonemic awareness. Constantly, the children would ask the parents to pronounce certain words and then they tried to imitate them. They were aware of the phonemic system of words too, as some of the children were noted to break words into phonemes in the exercise book provided. Ball and Blachman (1991) suggested that phonemic awareness is important with regards to learning to read and to spell. Moreover, phonemic awareness is a part of learning alphabetic principle and it must be explicitly taught to children (Adams, 1990).

**iii) Concept of print**

The children were also exposed to the concept of print. They were very interested in the illustrated books to the extent that they would copy the content into their own exercise books. Some even drew the images of birds as shown in the books. This shows that they could distinguish between oral and printed materials well. Clay (1985) noted that young learners develop an understanding that books convey meaning through print and that the sentences on the page represent a spoken language.

**iv) Letter-sound association**

The capability to establish letter-sound association was also noted among the young children. This was in line with development of their phonemic awareness. The researcher noted how the children could differentiate the sound of analogous letters such as /b/ and /p/ easily after the programme. The parents helped them to differentiate those associations as they were reading the stories to their children. Research has shown that teaching letter-sound associations explicitly to learners in reading is the best start for beginners (Adams, 1990; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Chall, 1967, 1983; Snow, Burns, & griffin, 1998).

**v) Analogy**

The development of analogy among the young children was not prominent in the present study. Eldredge (1995) noted that readers do not use analogy immediately. They must learn some letter-sound associations before they start the process on their own. However, two children managed to understand the concept of analogy through the help of their grandparents. The elders were capable of illustrating parallel definitions of certain Iban words due to their vast knowledge and experience.

**vi) A way to think about words**

Through the sharing of communal literacy activities within the community-based programme, young children's ability to find a way to think about words was also improved. This was mainly because of the illustrations that came with the story books as well as the experiences shared by their elders. The children were able to give the meaning of specific Iban words with the help of the images. It has been suggested that in order for learners to decode words by themselves, they must develop a strategy to independently apply what they have learned (Cooper, 2000). Research has also shown that readers do look at all the letters in words to decode them (Adams, 1990; Just & Carpenter, 1987).

The fourth research questions focused on the community-based education programme in enhancing children's cultural awareness. The findings of the study revealed that the participants were able to recall and remember parts of the cultural input presented to them in the book but still lacked awareness of their own culture. It has been stated that one needs to be taught in order to understand cultural myths which place boundaries around his or her awareness (Beare, 2001). From the findings, it was noted that the children had never been taught about augury and myth prior to the intervention. This could be due to several factors. Firstly, the parents themselves lacked sufficient knowledge of their culture to be able to pass this on to their children. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that human knowledge is derived from culture, and ideas are experienced through activities embedded in a particular social and cultural context. The external social world is thus important for a child's development (Tharp & Gallimore, 1998).

Secondly, the generation gap could be a factor in influencing the acceptance of the cultural knowledge. According to a family system model (Olson & DeFrain, 1994), an analysis of Iban communal lives in a longhouse could come under the category of extreme on both cohesion of either too close or too far apart. It may seem that even though family members are interconnected and seem to operate as a group, individualism still profound in Iban communities. Moreover, younger generations

have been educated in mainstream schooling system and they have different world views compared to those of their parents or grandparents.

Thirdly, the influences of other cultures within the community such as those related to Christianity, could be a factor especially since augury and myth are often associated with animism. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bioecological theory, Iban children are being indirectly affected by one or more of their Microsystems, such as religious practice within the communities. As such, more exposure to Iban culture should be provided to the younger generations, perhaps with the help of technology like computers and multimedia apart from books as produced by the researcher.

## CONCLUSION

Early literacy is best enhanced within cultural contexts and children's first language. Early learning process should go beyond recognition of letters, numbers and recalling facts from memories but to encompass a dynamic process of meaning creation and cooperation action relevant to children's cultures. The Iban are known for their mastery in the act of language through the illustration of the oral literature. Their oral literature contains a number of legends, rituals, chants and traditional songs which are mostly set in rhyming patterns. Furthermore, the language used seems to give great attention to the harmony of the words in collocation with each other and the beauty of sounds that encase those words. It is common therefore to find many words used in chants, songs and poems are meaningless but consist of beautiful sounds. Indigenous language has developed in its natural environment and it has a capacity for maximum use for various purposes in different cultural contexts orally.

When the language is organised in written forms, it is compatible to those scientific symbols used in acquiring literacy. In the book *Beburung*, features and characteristics of the seven augury birds are introduced in various rhyming words in order to impart skills and predilection to the use of words. Similarly, in the myth of *Aki Sengalang Burung* and *Aki Raja Simpulan Gana*, rhyming words are used to describe the gods as well as their specialised functions and powers. When oral tradition is recreated in written forms, words can be selected from those words with meaning but still able to maintain the harmonious and beautiful sounds of words. This is intended to enhance the mastery of the natural languages as well as early literacy.

Indigenous knowledge is assimilated into the children's literature. The calls and flights of the augury birds represent omens and taboos that act as guidance for the well being of the Iban. Ancestral wisdom that is embedded in the system of augury includes respect, kindness and compassion for other living beings so as to balance the cosmos and multi layered lives existing in the rainforest. This study thus places children's knowledge of their own culture and the ability to adapt it in scientific symbols in order to acquire early literacy as main external social factor that influence children's development. It is useful to begin the learning with the dimension of meaning that enable people to make sense of their world.

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