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The Rural Learning Environment and Pupils' Learning of the English Language

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines encouraging and discouraging factors in developing an English language learning environment for rural pupils with Asian backgrounds. This is achieved by first establishing a theoretical background to govern the research exploration. This research utilized social cognitive theory of learning as guidance in the current research explorations. Specifically, the study sample is drawn from six rural schools in Sabah, Malaysia (Southeast Asia). The study utilizes a mixed-method approach whereby findings are triangulated through interviews, observations, and questionnaires. The study reveals that majority of the schools visited lacked the necessary resources indicating a serious problem that hinders learning of the English language in rural schools. Conclusions consider the impact of certain environmental drawbacks on pupils' English language proficiency and the verdict that the existing environment has a negative impact on Asian rural pupils' language development. Further, it is emphasized that environmental issues in Asia require a deep grasp of the subject as well as various multi-disciplinary approaches, whose perspectives provide the basis for the functions of different environmental aspects.

Keywords: Rural pupils, English language, learning environment, achievement

INTRODUCTION

Though 70 percent of the world's population resides in rural regions, where hunger, literacy, and low school achievement are widespread, rural pupils have received minimal attention in comprehensive educational reform plans (Kam *et al*., 2006; Rigg & Ritchie, 2002). Those plans are targeted to upgrade the literacy level in rural areas, which in turn increases the

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productivity and earning potential of the population, and therefore directly reduces poverty (UNISCO, 2002).

In Asia, literacy levels specifically in the English language are below average due to historical and continuing weaknesses in the national education system (UNDP, 2010). This has resulted in the fabrication of an enormous percentage of illiterate population in Asian rural areas. Furthermore, national regional reports have indicated that a significant number of Asian rural pupils complete their schooling yet remain unable to read or write (Ozkal *et al*., 2009).

Educationists familiar with the Asian rural context asserted the need to identify the reasons behind Asian rural pupils' low literacy levels, especially in the English language. Likewise, they affirmed the need to identify the obstacles that hinder pupils' development process in rural areas (UNESCO, 2010). Improving Asian rural pupils' ability to read and write as well as identifying learning obstacles will encourage pupils to participate more fully in society and access the benefits of prosperous educational development (AusAID, 2005).

The current research posits that a pivotal obstacle is the absence of an effective learning environment and resources in Asian rural schools and communities. Scholars who have investigated issues related to education standards in rural settings have reported a general dissatisfaction over the effectiveness of rural education (Nelson, 1983). In line with such findings, various organizations have undertaken measures to improve the learning environment in rural schools.

Other than the lack of the latest educational resources, rural schools face other challenges associated with its geographic location, such as limited school and community resources (Hannum, Irvin, Banks & Farmer, 2009). Although a handful of rural schools have successfully met various challenges, many remain unable to cope with the demand of modern education standards (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005).

The situation in Malaysia is quite similar to that of other Asian countries. There is a general agreement that Malaysian rural schools suffer from a dearth of basic elements such as effective teaching learning environments and availability of suitable resources in ensuring the attainment of goals specified in the Vision 2020 plan; these goals include becoming a developed nation by the year 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2009). These shortcomings hinder the educational mission and reduce rural pupils' ability to acquire knowledge and skills that their urban counterparts obtain more readily.

Research on this matter has indicated a wide disparity between rural and urban pupils' achievements especially in the learning context English as a second and / or foreign language (Ghani & Gill, 2003). In the state of Sabah, for example, existing literature indicates that Malaysian rural schools do not benefit from an appropriate learning environment, nor do they have the resources to support and assist teachers in teaching English as a Second Language (Ming *et al.*, 2010). However, it must be noted that studies that investigate the

impact of rural environment on Malaysian pupils' language learning process are rare. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies that investigate the role of families and communities in supporting and advancing English as a Foreign Language, pupil proficiency and language learning in Malaysian rural schools.

To participate fully in the economic and political life of a country, adults are expected to have a good command of the English language, which will enable them to obtain jobs after finishing school. Furthermore, good English language proficiency will enhance the ability to achieve aspired goals (Abdul Majid *et al*., 2005). However, pupils' performance in the English language in Malaysian rural schools, especially in the state of Sabah, is unsatisfactory. This is confirmed by the low achievement level of rural pupils in the English language in the Primary School Evaluation Test "UPSR" in the state of Sabah, as shown in Fig.1.

This paper attempts to examine how the surrounding environment affects pupils' learning of the English language and their literacy ability in Sabah rural schools. It establishes the need for further research targeted to detect environmental impact on Malaysian rural pupils' educational development levels. Thus, contribution to increased understanding of the rural students' situation will be significant for a considerably wider application.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study came from the need of having a better understanding of the problems in English language learning among Malaysian rural pupils. This study also aimed at identifying some of the reasons behind Malaysian rural pupils' low marks in

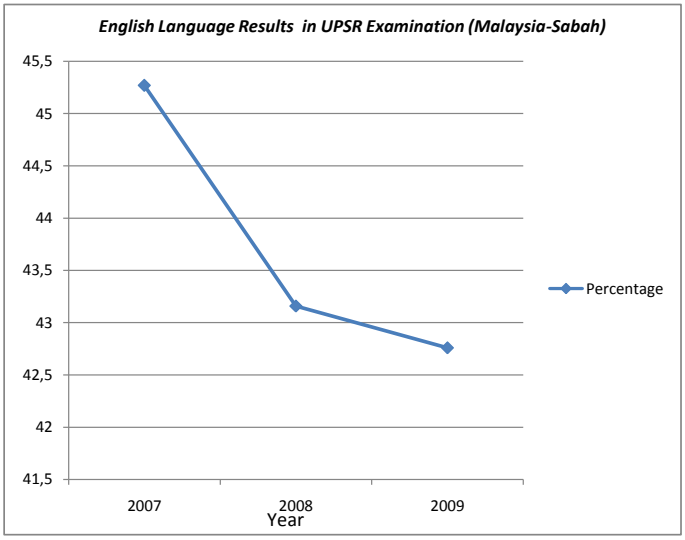

Fig.1: English Language Results in Primary School Evaluation Test "UPSR", Malaysia-Sabah (Ministry of Education-Sabah 2010)

English language. To achieve the objectives, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the existing physical learning environment suit the pupils' English language acquisition needs?
2. What is the teacher's role in creating an effective learning experience for the pupils?
3. Are there sufficient learning resources in the pupils' schools, homes and community?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research Underpinning Theory

This research utilizes social cognitive theories of learning as guidance in the current research explorations. This theory assisted the researchers in examining the nature and status of literacy in the rural learning environment. Pupils in school are influenced by external factors on the one hand and by their environment on the other hand (Sawyer, 2002). In addition to environmental cultural influence, the researchers endeavored to lay emphasis on the cognitive elements of literacy, skills, and development of such in a social cognitive learning environment. The social cognitive theory is a learning theory based on the idea that people learn by watching what others do and that human thought processes are central to understanding personality (Darville, 1999). In other words, knowledge acquisition can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside media influences. If one were motivated to learn a particular behavior, then that particular behavior would be learned through clear observations. By imitating these observed actions, the individual observer would solidify the learned action and be rewarded with positive reinforcement (Miller & Dollard, 1941). In addition, social cognitive theory was defined as a series of a triadic, dynamic, and reciprocal interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment (Bandura, 1986). In subsequent research, Banadura (*1989)* argued:

> *"In social cognitive theory, people are neither driven by inner forces nor automatically shaped and controlled by the environment. As we have already seen, they function as contributors to their own motivation, behavior, and development within a network of reciprocally interacting influences. Persons are characterized within this theoretical perspective in terms of a number of basic capabilities, to which we turn next."*
>
> (Bandura, 1989, p.8)

In providing a full understanding of the functions of social cognitive theory, the researchers were able to generate a general question related to this theory; this is the extent to which this theory is beneficial in gathering the aspired research data.

This social cognitive theory provides the researchers with guidelines and a strong foundation to address the literacy issues with

a slightly different view from other cognitive theories, which consist of significant traits that are helpful in detecting different factors that may influence the learning environment in rural environment. In addition, the social cognitive theory provides clear guiding principles on how to construct a flexible sense of self-efficiency, which operates in concert with other socio-cognitive factors in a multifaceted causal structure (Bandura, 1999). The social cognitive theory provides a large body of particularized knowledge on how to develop cognitive structures and enlist the processes of the self system governing human adaptation and change (Bandura, 1997a). The determinants and mechanisms through which they operate are clear; hence, the theory provides explicit guidelines on how to structure conditions that foster personal and social changes (Bandura, 1999).

Child-friendly Schools (CFS) in Asia

The Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development (MCED) in Asia has effectively launched a major regional discussion for reviewing the state of environment and development in Asia. The review is based on evaluation criteria, obstacles and challenges, voices and perspectives towards achieving an educational environment conducive to the development process (Barley & Beesley, 2007). In line with such discussions, sensitive public awareness of various environmental problems has been witnessed throughout research and initiatives, pointing towards the regional concern for creating a conducive learning environment that heightens development levels. In other words, creating a friendly and conducive learning environment can assist pupils especially in rural areas to acquire knowledge in an effective manner. This type of environment is founded on the support from society and culture on the one hand, and the formation of a conducive home and school learning environment on the other hand.

Focus on the school environment has been detected in early Asian educational initiatives driven by the rationale that the school is a significant entity and so is the social environment in the lives of pupils. To address this concern, a child-friendly schools (CFS) program was launched in 1997 in Thailand to emphasize the rights of the child to receive effective "child-friendly" education that is environmentally and physically safe (Shaeffer 1999).

The CFS framework consists of five broad dimensions.

> *"Inclusiveness; effectiveness (relevance and quality); health, safety and protection; gender-friendliness; and involvement of students, families and communities."*
>
> (UNICEF, 2006: iii)

In line with the CFS program, many Asian countries in May 2004 agreed to develop child-friendly schools in their respective educational contexts in an attempt to achieve quality education this was designed for all pupils with the support of

teachers, families, and all the segments of society, with goals of achieving the principal aim of "education for all" (UNICEF, 2005).

Since then, the CFS approach has continued to influence the educational systems in various countries. As a result, the program has evolved into the "Whole School Reform," which is geared towards improving the outcomes of children's learning by altering schools and education systems to develop child-centered education in child-friendly schools (Beska *et al*., 2007).

In Malaysia, numerous educational initiatives have been witnessed, such as the Malaysian Education Summit, that have sought to help educationists in rural areas to embrace modernization by effecting reforms in educational systems. This is because education in Malaysian rural schools has become a serious issue in the wake of neglect (Malaysian Education Summit, 2008).

The country launched many literacy programs targeted at eliminating illiteracy in the country especially in rural areas such as the state of Sabah. The launched programs prioritized the rural pupils' needs. With this awareness, educational research now pays significant attention to factors affecting rural students' educational levels as well as the learning and teaching process involved (Miner, 2006; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005; Wang, 2009).

On the other hand, as the Malaysian Ministry of Education continually attempts to provide a pathway to meet the need for comprehensive policy reform in rural areas, it is crucial to identify specifically the problems faced by these rural pupils. Meanwhile, educationists asserted the need for educational comprehensive educational policy reform that takes into account the different dimensions of effectual reform (Karsou, 2005). In addition, the importance of education was declared as the main element in fostering the goal of being a fully developed nation by 2020. Therefore, the Ministry of Education is committed towards making this a reality (Ministry of Education, 2009). Based on the aspirations to become an industrialized nation, Malaysia has made conscious efforts to improve and develop education to achieve a literacy rate of 100% by the year 2020. Though the country has a long way to go, there are positive indications that the literacy rate is increasing (Morad, 2002).

Learning Environment's Impact on Pupils' Early Education

Recent research (Asici, 2009; Walker & Clark, 2010) on pupils' learning environment emphasized the impact of particular environments, culture, and the classroom on pupils' early education and behavior. Meanwhile, other researchers discovered that as income level increases and the surrounding environment becomes comfortable, children's natural learning experiences related to language learning increase as well (Asici, 2009). Young children respond differently based on the design of the environment in which they live, an effectively designed classroom has the potential for positively influencing all areas

of children's development: physical, social /emotional, and cognitive. Language and learning are nurtured in an environment that values and plans appropriate opportunities (Burns, Griffin & Snow, 1999).

Adequate quality facilities will allow teachers, pupils, subject matter, space, and time to interact within the learning and teaching process, which in turn creates a conducive and well structured learning environment. A well-organized classroom physical environment will positively assist teachers and students to create a climate conducive to language learning (Savage, 1999; Stewart & Evans, 1997). Appropriate classroom physical arrangements form a base for supplementing pupils with effective education and facilitate positive language learning and language teaching interactions.

In other words, the classroom physical arrangement should be set according to the varied cultural and linguistic characteristics of the pupils; it should satisfy the learner's needs as well (Bettenhausen, 1998; MacAulay, 1990). The physical arrangement of the classroom environmental print is considered an important aspect that contributes to student proficiency. Collectively, environmental print is defined as the print found in the natural instant environment of children, including logos, labels, road signs, billboards, clothing labels, coupons, and newspaper advertisements. Children encounter environmental print as a first stage before reading print in books (Kirkland, Aldridge & Kuby, 1991).

In addition, a center-based environmental print activity allows pupils to construct their own knowledge driven from their interaction with different environmental aspects; these enhance their proficiency levels and language learning. On the other hand, parents play an effective role in pupils' language development process and in guiding children to learn essential elements of language learning prior to attending school (Mason, 1980; Walker & Clark, 2010). According to Clay (1993), many researchers have discovered that preschool children explore the details of print in their environment, on signs, cereal packages, and television advertisements. Children develop concepts on books, newspapers, and other print available in their environment. Consequently, more advanced concepts on print emerge from children's earlier understandings.

Children's early years are characterized by rapid increase and improvement. Children enter their pre-school years with a considerable amount of learning experiences from their friends and relatives. Since education is specific to each language and culture, a young child requires assistance in making sense of environmental print from a more able peer, parent, or teacher (Vygotsky, 1978). Children are influenced by multiple contexts in which there are reciprocal interactions between them and their environment. Likewise, children are affected by face-to-face interactions, such as those that occur at home or school. However, children are influenced as well by their parents' or guardians' workplace and the social, historical, political, and economic realities of the times.

The day-to-day context is especially important in using environmental print to plan and implement an integrated curriculum to meet children's needs (Kirkland, 2006). Children's inventions and approximations about language in a society full of print begin long before they attend school. Furthermore, children develop ideas about language in the same way they develop ideas in other learning areas.

There are a number of activities that support children's language learning development. These are derived from families, communities, and schools. The family's involvement in the learning process always indicates positive impact on student achievement levels, including attendance, activities, and school awareness (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Parents, teachers, and the community are the most important sources for knowledge acquisition, and research on the improvement of pupils' proficiency levels illustrated that children perform better in school when parents are involved in the educational process (Eagle, 1989).

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The targeted population of this research are the rural teachers' and pupils' in the Malaysian rural schools, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The research instruments used on the target sample were namely; questionnaire, interviews, observations and document analysis. In addition, quantitative data was obtained from the pupils' diagnostic tests. The diagnostic tests were administered to Year 3 and Year 5 pupils. The Year 3 pupils attempted the diagnostic test that were developed based on the Year 3 English curriculum, while the Year 5 pupils sat for the diagnostic test developed based on the Year 5 English curriculum.

The items in the Year 3 test were divided into 6 sections:

1. Section A: subject verb agreement;
2. Section B: Correcting sentences through rearrangement of words
3. Section C: colours and basic shapes;
4. Section D: reading comprehension;
5. Section E: sentence construction and;
6. Section F: guided composition writing.

The items in year 5 test consisted of 5 sections:

1. Section A: pronouns;
2. Section B: Correcting sentences through rearrangement of words;
3. Section C: basic grammar- articles, comparatives, connectors;
4. Section D: reading comprehension and;
5. Section E: guided composition writing

The questionnaire consists of 4 sections designed and administered to the teachers in the rural areas who are teaching English language in the selected schools. The questionnaire for teachers (Appendix B), was developed by the researchers from Brown's theory (1995) as shown in (Appendix A). The deployment of

quantitative techniques entailed the use of the teachers' questionnaire in order to ensure objectivity and generalizability.

As for the collection of qualitative data, classroom observations were done and structured interviews with teachers were carried out by the researher.

Group interviews were not used because of the concern that remarks made by participants may affect the type of the information in focus groups sessions (Debus, 1988). On the other hand the classroom observation technique was activated through observing teachers teaching, pupils' interaction with teacher and among themselves and classroom or school environment. Using the data from the questionnaire, the interviews, observations and the analysis of documents, a triangulation was done.

The sample of the study was from six rural schools (Island, Riverside & Foothill) in the state of Sabah during the school year (2007-2008) and it consisted of seven teachers and 105 pupils. The sample of the current study is representative of the rural pupils in Sabah. Table 1 shows the codes of the interviewed teachers and schools in the study sample.

For example, an interviewer's response that is recorded from Teacher No. 1 at the first school located on the riverside will be referenced as **Teacher A-S1-R**. Similarly, an interviewer's response from Teacher No. 3, who is from the fourth school located on the Island, will be referenced as **Teacher C-S4-I**.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results and analysis of data was done and the research questions below were answered:

Does the existing physical learning environment suit the pupils' needs?

An environment that is conducive to learning is the main determinant of effective education. The results obtained from the data collection techniques employed in the current study indicated that the environment was not conducive in S1, S3, and S6 for English language learning. As shown in Fig.2, the notice boards and classroom were almost empty. Aside from the unhelpful learning environment, the schools lacked appropriate facilities such as spacious and comfortable classrooms equipped with suitable learning tools. The study also found

TABLE 1
Codes given to the Teachers and Schools

School	Code	Category	Code	Teachers	Code
School No. 1	S1	Island	I	Teacher No.1	Teacher A
School No. 2	S2	Riverside	R	Teacher No.2	Teacher B
School No.3	S3	Foot Hill	FH	Teacher No. 3	Teacher C
School No.4	S4	Island	I	Teacher No.4	Teacher D
School No.5	S5	Riverside	R	Teacher No.5	Teacher E
School No.6	S6	Foot Hill	FH	Teacher No.6	Teacher F

that the classrooms were shared by two or three cohorts of pupils.

In contrast, schools such as S4 and S5 (Fig.3 and Fig.4) did have some materials on the walls, such as poems and charts. However, these materials were unsuitable for the pupils because they used a highly advanced level of vocabulary. Creating and maintaining stimulating learning environments have been shown to be achieved through effective classroom organization that considers all the elements constituting balanced education. Moreover, organizing an effective physical environment of the classroom will prevent pupils and teachers from experiencing behavioral difficulties (Savage, 1999; Shores, Gunter & Jack, 1993) and improve student proficiency levels (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).



Fig.2: 'Empty' classroom, 'Empty' walls do not promote a conducive learning environment

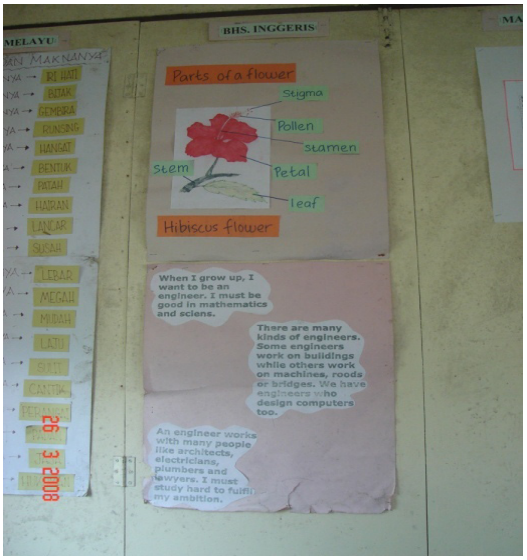

Fig.3: Poster- Too difficult for pupils

What is the teacher's role in creating an effective learning experience for the pupils?

The findings of the study revealed that most of the teachers at the sample schools were not professionally qualified, did not prepare instructional materials, and lacked ability to plan student management for different educational needs and capabilities. One of the main reasons behind this was inadequate teachers' training. In fact, in interviews, many teachers declared that they lacked training and language skills, which are required for their teaching. A well-implemented teacher training program will not only help improve teachers' abilities (Werikat, 2009) but will also influence pupils' performance (Wiley & Yoon, 1995).

The findings of the study indicate that in S1, the teachers were not very concerned about school activities, resulting in poor classroom management. In contrast, teachers in S2 and S3 showed concern but faced several stumbling blocks, such as lack of materials and resources. In S4 and S5, charts and pictures throughout the school made the environment very cheerful (Fig.5 and Fig.6). However, in S6, although some of the teachers were professionally qualified, they seemed unconcerned about the pupils' progress. Thus, teachers' professional qualification in different aspects of teaching can be considered insufficient in upgrading pupils' performance. For teachers to possess the drive and a set of values is more important to improve their teaching practices and subsequently raise their pupils' proficiency level. For example, teachers did not implement any of the data derived from pupils' assessments, hindering their ability to devise suitable instructional strategies and create an environment conducive to learning. Such assessments provide teachers with valuable information on developing appropriate opportunities for learning improvement (Chrisman, 2005).



Fig.4: Vocabulary Poster- Too difficult for pupils

With regard to teachers' role in creating an effective learning environment, the study revealed the following:

- Teachers did not clarify the role of their pupils in the surrounding environment.
- Teachers did not provide situational dialogues related to their communities.
- Teachers did not find inventive ways to teach language in an effective learning

Teachers' deficiency in creating an effective learning environment awareness decreased pupils' understanding of various environmental aspects, which in turn reflected negatively on pupils' interest in learning the language. The study found that apart from S4, all the schools lacked language-related initiatives to build pupils' confidence and motivation to learn English. Teachers in these schools were highly examination-oriented because English was not considered important in pupils' immediate needs. Moreover, they considered passing the exams more essential. The teachers did not apply motivational strategies to improve pupils' drive to learn the language. Pupils' motivation is recognized as one of the most important factors in acquiring language skills. In addition, "motivation serves as the initial engine to generate learning and later functions as an ongoing driving force that helps to sustain the long and usually laborious journey of acquiring a foreign language" (Cheng & Do¨rnyei, 2007, p.153).

Only S4 organized activities related to English language learning, such as English Week. According to Teacher B (S4-I), some activities were conducted for the pupils. He also recalled the previous year's establishment of a pupils' learning club and holding of outdoor activities. Some schools, such as S4 and S5, attempted to create an environment conducive to learning by hanging colorful posters on the walls and building reading huts for pupils.



Fig.5: Notices on the classroom walls

However, the pupils lacked the motivation to learn the language because the teachers did not use examples from their surrounding environment. Those that were often used contained outdated information not related to the pupils' environment or their needs. Textbooks are considered the basis of language input pupils receive because they provide the content of the lesson and supplement teachers' instructions. Textbook structure, which is targeted to upgrade teachers' professional adequacy and pupils' language learning levels, provides support for new teaching approaches related to environmental aspects (Stanley, 2003) inside and outside the classroom.



Fig.6: Notices on the Library Wall- Effective pictures



Fig.7: A Reading Hut in S4

The study suggests that textbooks help in teaching numbers, colors, and greetings in S2 Year 1. According to a teacher, the aspects of numbers and colors are repeated in Math and Science. One weakness of S4 is that the level used is too high for the pupils, and the content is not appropriate to their background and experience.

> *I used the textbook before but, unfortunately, the content is very long. The story inside is also very long. Eventually, I gave priority to the UPSR material.*
>
> (Teacher C, S5-R)

> *No, I think the textbook in use now is not suitable for pupils' abilities and academic level; the syllabus is above the pupils' levels.*
>
> (Teacher D, S6-F)

The preceding quotations derived from the interviews with teachers revealed their dissatisfaction with the existing curriculum, which is not suitable for pupils due to the difficult topics which are beyond the pupils' academic abilities. It is important that curriculum be designed with topics that are in accordance with pupils' needs, abilities and academic level.

Are there sufficient learning resources in the pupils' schools, homes, and community?

Both quantitative and qualitative data in this study showed that S1 had resources in the form of a mini-library. However, the books were not suitable for the learners because many of them were irrelevant in terms of language and content. In S2, resources were not readily available to the pupils. Even newspapers were not available for reading or referencing, to both teachers and pupils. In S3, pupils had access to some of the resources. In S4, resources were inadequate; the books' contents were so difficult for the pupils that too many books remained unused. Only a handful of pupils in all the schools visited the mini-library; they seldom read English materials or borrowed books, especially books written in English. However, pupils in S6 used the library and borrowed books, especially English books. School libraries can generate a positive effect on pupils' proficiency and learning levels if they are used in a efficient manner, especially at the primary levels (Williams *et al*., 2002).

Year 5 pupils in S1 acknowledged the fact that their teachers used different teaching aids, such as pictures and numbers, in teaching English. However, Year 3 and 4 pupils said that their teacher only used the textbook in class.

In S4, when there is electricity supply, teachers use computers or television; in most instances, they use handouts in teaching. Teachers in S5 use the Internet and resource books. In S6, when electricity supply is available, teachers use computers, otherwise rely on textbooks.

The survey results showed that teachers used various technologies (LCD panel, overhead projector, video, TV, and Internet) as teaching aids (mean=3.48). Teachers also concurred that their schools provided adequate teaching aids for ELT (mean=3.21).



Fig.8: Outdated English books in the S4 library/Do not motivate pupils' to learn



Fig.9: Resources available in S6



Fig.10: Resources available in S6

I have used television before to support my teaching. Sometimes I allow my pupils to watch cartoons in English language.

(Teacher B, S4-I)

I, myself, bought books for my students. Sometimes I let them use my broadband Internet connection for surfing.

(Teacher F, S4-I)

It was observed that teachers still used very traditional teaching methods. A main cause for this situation is the lack of quality technological resources that should be provided by the Ministry of Education for each educational level in these rural schools. Pupils in these schools looked to their teachers as their main source of knowledge because of the absence of resources at home or community center for the pupils' use. One of the teachers interviewed verified this point:

I gave them four story books, namely, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Jack and Jill. The pupils were very excited; sometimes they would ask me to act inside the classroom based on the story book. But sometimes I do not have enough time, so I ask them to read and try to understand the story book themselves.

(Teacher C, S5-R)

In the case of S1, newspapers were unavailable on the island. According to the pupils, the shops did not sell any newspapers. There were also no resources at home for the pupils. According to a teacher in S2 , nobody in the village has the ability to converse in English. Even the community had no resources for the pupils' use. A teacher affirmed this point in the interview:

I think they don't have newspapers. I asked them before if they had any and replied that they didn't know.

(Teacher C, S5-R)

The unavailability of resources in the community center was common in all the schools in the study.. This resulted in the lowering of pupils' English language learning levels and the community centers' reduced ability to make a positive educational difference. The study also revealed that parents did not give the pupils any encouragement to learn English. The parents in these areas are unaware of the importance of supporting their children in learning the English language.

There is concrete evidence that the home environment affects pupils' learning outcomes in their early life (Nechyba *et al.*, 2005). Research worldwide indicates that families are linked to schools in different activities, such as "parent participation" or "school-family associations" (Jordan *et al.*, 2001). Lack of support negatively affects pupils' English language learning. However, only the parents in S3 gave encouragement

to their children to learn English. As one teacher stated in the interview,

> *Pupils do not learn the English language even at home. There is also no encouragement and support from the parents. If pupils don't have any guidance in English language, it will be hard for them to learn.*
>
> (Teacher B, S3-I)

Parents' increased level of positive encouragement and involvement in their children's education will reflect on their children's knowledge and activities in school, which in turn will positively affect their proficiency levels.

CONCLUSION

The triangulation of data postulates clearly the effect of the environment on rural Malaysian pupils' English language levels. Evidently, the findings of the study show that they face many difficulties in early education in terms of the language learning environment inside and outside the school. However, the two principal causes of rural Malaysian pupils' low proficiency levels (i.e., poor learning environment and lack of resources) are rarely discussed in professional journals or books on applied linguistics. The relevant literature indicates lack of studies specifically focusing on the effect of environment and resources on pupils' English language development and their role in improving rural pupils' proficiency levels. Thus, there is a compelling need to understand the effect of the environment and resources on rural Malaysian pupils' learning.

In sum, the results of the study show that the learning environments in the selected schools are not conducive to English language learning. For example, notice boards and classroom boards are almost bare. The schools also lack adequate facilities such as appropriately sized classrooms equipped with suitable effective teaching tools that provide comfortable learning conditions.

The teachers lack concern in implementing positive changer are not adequately trained to manage their classrooms and lack the language skills required to help the pupils. Pupils lack motivation to learn the language because teachers do not use examples such as from the surrounding environment, to help them understand better. However, those who do use relevant examples that match the pupils' background knowledge often rely on outdated information.

The interviews with the teachers suggest their dissatisfaction with the existing curriculum, which is not suitable for the pupils. The curriculum's topics are challenging and beyond the pupils' academic abilities and English language proficiency.

Rural teachers have been observed to lack quality technological sources in schools, forcing them to teach in accordance with traditional methods that are unable to keep up with the massive worldwide educational development. In turn, these traditional methods compel pupils to look

to their teachers as the main resource of knowledge. In the interviews, the teachers indicated their frustrations with the schools' lack of proper educational resources. The problem also largely stems from the absence of sufficient family support and encouragement because rural parents do not realize the importance of their own role in advancing children's proficiency levels.

Although policy makers are concerned about the factors influencing the community structure of rural areas, the need to direct their efforts towards developing rural education is critical. This is important to narrow the gap of the communities' knowledge Determining the various factors facilitating rural education development provides a good start. The theory (i.e., social cognitive theory) that underpins the research, suggests that pupils function as contributors (Bandura, 1999) to their own motivation within an environment of commonly interrelated influences. It also suggests that these pupils do not apply everything that they have learned because of various environmental factors influencing the interpretation of the learning acquired (Bandura, 1996).

This study is significant because it has investigated and discussed rural pupils' proficiency development and the factors that influence these proficiency levels. Based on the results of the study and in light of the rural pupils' needs, the following recommendations are made:

- The Ministry of Education should investigate the reasons behind the lack of resources in Malaysian rural areas and schools.
- The Ministry of Education should assign teachers who are trained to manage pupils' educational development.

IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of the study and the identification of the factors that influence pupils' proficiency levels led to suggestions on how best decision makers can create conducive learning environments in Malaysian rural schools. Determining the various factors affecting pupils' conducive learning environments has serious implications for the way learning inside classroom is conducted and for the way recourses for language learning is considered effective and useful in rural schools.

The utilization of social cognitive theory in this study integrated pupils' language acquisition with learning environment. This will aid decision makers to refine the processes that guide rural education development in order to monitor and develop language learning in rural classrooms. In addition, identifying teachers' role in creating an effective learning experience for rural pupils will aid teachers in rural schools to undertake the roles while managing their classrooms and to create better educational climate that would realize the aspired standards in promoting language learning and teaching process in Malaysia.

There are several important questions that need to be investigated in future

research. With regards to feature set, this study has confirmed the influence of the learning environments (the physical learning environment, learning experience, and resources) on rural pupils' learning of the English language. The motivation of both teachers and students has not been discussed in this study as a major influencing factor. We believe that this may be a useful research direction, with the view of investigating motivation in comprehensive research where motivational factors may not always be available. We also believe that further research should explore the background of both teachers and students and its effect on the teaching and learning processes in rural areas. The researchers in this study have suggested the possible causes of rural students' lack of knowledge and showed a portion of the current educational situation in the Malaysian rural context. Determining other causes is a research aim that deserves to be investigated in the future.

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