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Title

**Smart Partnership Between Universiti Teknologi Malaysia And FELDA Johor Bahru:
Increasing Interest In English And Parents' Commitment.**

Smart partnerships formed between universities and communities have successfully solved many problems and enhanced the strengths of both parties. This case study examines the structures, resources, and processes that have formed and sustained one successful university-industry partnership in Malaysia. This study is based on a project “inculcating interest in English among children of Tenggara community area”, which aims to increase interest among students in rural areas to like, learn and use English. This paper focuses on 1) the benefits - building interest in the English language and commitment from parents in the rural area; and 2) the activities carried out in the project. The nine principles of good practice for community-campus partnership informed the study. A qualitative data-collection of background, interviews and observations are used to identify the personal experience of individuals involved (i.e administrators, facilitators, parents, community leaders and literacy teachers). The results show evidence that the four-year collaboration met all the nine principles of community-campus partnership, in terms of sharing of leadership and resources, people, guidelines and course of action to support the goals of the partnership. Students showed increased interest in the language; and the parents are committed to the sustenance of English use at home.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Smart partnerships are based on the “win-win prosper thy neighbor principle” of establishing consensus between two groups or among groups in benefiting each other. They do not just only apply to individuals, groups or categories of people but also to big institutions and even nations.

In Malaysia, smart partnerships were extended when the country officially adopted the concept of Malaysia Incorporated. Here the public sector and private sector worked as partners to facilitate the economic development of the country in which both have a stake. This kind of smart partnership has been extended to all levels of society.

One smart partnership that has been formed is smart partnership between educational institution and industry. In this particular case it is a smart partnership between University Technology of Malaysia, and educational institution and FELDA Johor Bahru, and industry/community. The arrangement formed between the university and community has successfully solved many problems and enhanced the strength of both parties.

1.1 Institutions Involved

1.1.1 FELDA Johor Bahru

FELDA was established on the 1 of July, 1956 under the Land Development Ordinance 1956. The main role of FELDA was to open new land to be developed into estate or plantation. Apart from that, the establishment of FELDA was also to provide land scheme to the citizens who do not own land with the aim of improving their livelihood. FELDA scheme established the “complete whole” system by providing all the amenities and support to improve the livelihood of the settlers in terms of financial, economic and educational and spiritual matters. In line with this land development scheme, self-development is emphasized by providing social and community development programmes covering all aspects of the settlers’ lives.

One of the objectives of FELDA is to shape rural communities with positive attitude towards development, communities that are progressive, disciplined and modern. Producing children who excel academically is among the main agenda of FELDA management. Every year, various efforts have been initiated by FELDA and educational officers who are concerned in solving the academic problem of the children of FELDA (Shamsul, 2001). Therefore, the FELDA management and the settlers community have worked together to form different committees to oversee various educational activities in each respective scheme. These committees are listed below :

1. Committee for Community Development (*Jawatankuasa Kemajuan Rancangan*)
2. Educational Bureau (*Biro Pendidikan*)
3. Educational Consultative Council (*Majlis Muafakat Pendidikan*)

1.1.2 Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) is a public higher learning institution located in Skudai, Johor , the southern state in Malaysia that mostly offers various degrees from different technical disciplines. However, the Faculty of Education of UTM does offer

teaching degree programs which include The Bachelor of Science in Education with the emphasis on Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL). Most students with the B. Sc (Ed.) TESL will eventually become English teachers in fulfilling the much needed English language teachers, while others end up as other English language practitioners, such as journalists, public relation officer, editors, text-book writers, trainers and other professions which require strong command of English. The program provides the students with an intensive teacher-training program, which includes courses in the English language such as methodology of teaching English, language learning theories, microteaching, practical teaching, and etc. The lecturers teaching the program are graduates, (some with Ph. D, most with masters degree) in the teaching of English as a second language from overseas and local universities. Some of the lecturers are former school teachers in the country with years of experience teaching the language in schools. Therefore, the lecturers can be said to possess vast knowledge and experience in the teaching of English as a second language.

2.0 THE PROJECT

“Inculcating Interest in English Language among School-going Children of FELDA Tenggara Areas” program was based on the principle that academic excellence among school children require the combined efforts of all involved parties, namely the family, the school, the community and the Felda management itself. The scope was limited to the idea of helping the second generation of Felda settlers to excel in academics, especially in the English language. Academic results in the past have shown that children of FELDA settlers have performed well academically but the English Language has always been termed as the ‘killer subject’ in most schools in the rural areas including in FELDA settlement areas as it has always been the subject that pulled down the children’s grades.

A majority of the settlers agree that English language is the main reason for their children’s failure to enter boarding schools or to pursue tertiary education in institutions of higher learning. As most of the settlers are concerned about their children’s education, they understand that something must be done to address this problem but they lack the knowledge on what and how to do it. They seek Felda management’s assistance to help them rectify the problem.

Subsequently, FELDA management seek the expertise of the lecturers from the Modern Languages Department of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai to help them with the implementation of the various English literacy programmes.

Different programmes are planned and carried out by the FELDA management and the Department of Modern Languages, Faculty of Management & Human Resource Development, UTM in order to improve the academic performance of the children of FELDA. The objective of the project is to provide a platform for parents and other interested parties to be involved in the helping the children to improve their English language proficiency. The following programmes have been initiated and established :

1. English Language Camps
2. English Literacy Programs
 - Kindergarten Program
 - Stage 1 (Primary 1 & 2)

- Stage 2 (Primary 3,4 & 5)

3. Motivation Talks for Parents and Teachers
4. Workshops for Facilitator of English Literacy Program
5. Students Visit to UTM.

2.1 English Language Camps

Over the last 4 years, twelve language camps have been carried out at twelve Felda settlement schemes under the management of Felda Johor Bahru. A batch of 100 standard 5 students are selected from all primary schools in the region where the camp is held at a FELDA scheme.

The actual running of the language camps is done by facilitators among year 3 and year 4 from the B.(Ed.) TESL students in UTM. These facilitators will graduate as English language teachers in the future. They are trained by four lecturers from the Modern Languages Department on the aspects of games and activities suitable for the target group for the language camps and the implementation of the camps. The facilitators also prepare materials upon approval by the lecturers. The activities are divided into three parts: indoor activities, outdoor activities and integration of multimedia in language learning. Different TESL students became the facilitators but they conduct the camps as part of the 'Language Games' class requirement. The four lecturers conduct workshops for the FELDA facilitators were also involved as advisors and consultants in all the camps..

In general the community involvement is very encouraging because majority if not all members of the community take part in the camps. Mothers help to cook all the meals, fathers patrol the schools during the camps for security purposes and the FELDA management help with the running of the camps.

The programmes are packed with English language activities starting from the night the participants registered until the last hour on Sunday when the camp ends. Many participants actually begin to use the language in their everyday conversation with their friends during the language camp.

2.1.1 Benefits Gained by UTM from these Language Camps

Through this collaboration, UTM gains a lot of benefits, as explained below. As mentioned earlier, the B. Sc. (Ed.) students from the Faculty of Education who are doing Teaching English As A Second Language (TESL) programme are the facilitators for the language camps held. Those who facilitate the language camps are either students who are taking an elective subject called 'Language Games' and the language camp is part of the subject or requirement or they are volunteers who volunteer to experience something different from classroom activities. The advantages that the language camps bring to the facilitators could be grouped into 3 areas, namely :

2.1.1.1 Real Teaching Learning Experience

The facilitators are given the opportunities to meet real students (the participants of the camps) and experience real life teaching situation. In lectures, references are made about the target groups (the pupils) and the different situations for the

ESL teaching. Having the chance to handle pupils in formal and informal situations has given the facilitators invaluable experience in order to understand the teaching learning processes. These opportunities are very vital to the facilitators who will in the future be teaching English at different settings and environments. In addition to that, during the language camps, the facilitators are expected to assimilate into the community where the camps are conducted. They also have the opportunities to practice their communication and social skills. These skills are very important when they go out to the real world of the school system later when they have to communicate ideas with other fellow teachers and the community. The lecturers' observations also confirm that the language camps have actually improved the facilitators' proficiency and confidence in using the English language.

2.1.1.2 Putting Theories Into Practice

Being mostly in the 3rd or 4th year in the TESL programme, the facilitators have been exposed to many theories on English Language learning and acquisition processes. Through these language camps, they have the opportunity to apply whatever theories they have learned in lectures into practice. Amongst the claims made by facilitators after the language camps was that now they understand more the processes involved in learning or acquiring the English language in a-not-so conducive environment, such as teaching English in rural areas where the odds are against them, facilities are minimal and motivation to learn the language is almost non-existent. Before the camps, the facilitators just had to imagine that such situations existed but the language camps act as an eye opener to them as they saw for the first time the true picture of what has been preached over the years in their lectures or tutorials – “seeing is believing.”

The facilitators are observed having to make a lot of adjustments in handling the pupils whose proficiency in the language is minimal. This process of adjusting in putting theories into practice will help them in their studies and prepare them for the teaching practice (practical teaching) and the real world of English language teaching.

2.1.1.3 Learning Management Skills

The TESL students who are involved in the language camps also have the opportunity to improve their management skills in conducting and running of a language camp programme in school. Before each language camp, the facilitators come together at different meetings to discuss various issues related to the programme. They also appoint different students to be in charge of the different activities and be responsible for the teaching materials to be prepared for the activities of the camp. In doing so, they actually learn how to organize and run the programme by themselves. In addition, to learn how to manage time, having to juggle between being a full time students with classes, assignments and quizzes, they also need to put aside some time to prepare for the language camps. The amount of efforts and work they put in preparing for the language camp benefit them in the long run as they can conduct such programme in school after they graduate.

2.1.2 The Positive Comments from FELDA managers about the Language Camps

Different positive feedbacks are given by three FELDA managers on the participants upon their return from the language camps. The managers of different FELDA schemes express that the language camp activities are well received by the participants. However, they suggest that for future Language Camps to be more successful, teachers of neighbouring schools should be involved so that assessment and monitoring of the participants' performance can be carried out after the language camps. The managers furthermore report that the objectives of the language camps are achieved, which is to remove the "mental block" that English language is a difficult subject to learn. They also propose that the language camp be an ongoing activity so as to maintain the participants' interest in the language and to monitor the progress made by the participants. This view is also shared by some teachers who report that upon returning from the language camp, the many students from his FELDA scheme who attend the language camp perform very well in their English language test given by their teachers. They also suggest that teachers from the schools should be involved in future English language camps as they are the ones who have continuous access to the participants and they can continue giving the children practice especially in activities that have so much capture the participants' interest in the English language learning endeavour.

2.2 English Literacy for Literary Programmes

2.2.1 Kindergarten Program

English Literacy for Kindergarten Programme (ELK) is established with the aim of instilling interest in the English language among children from a very early age. The target group is children between the age of 5 and 6 years old. The aim is to introduce the children to English, so that they will not feel too alien to the subject, and therefore they will be receptive to the language when they enter Primary 1 where Science and Mathematics subjects will be taught in English. In addition, another important objective of the programme is to familiarize the children to the English sound system. The ELK programme is usually conducted in the Community Hall (*Balairaya*) or in specially built kindergarten. The facilitators of this programme are employees and residents from respective FELDA schemes who can speak and read in English. The activities range from pronunciation of words in English to reading of simple stories and singing nursery rhymes in groups.

2.2.2 English Literacy Stage 1

English Literacy Stage 1 (ELS) is for primary school children of year 1 and year 2. The aim for having English classes at this age is to support the learning of English in schools as well as to alienate the misconception that English is a difficult language to learn. The aim is to instill the idea that the English language can be easily acquired through enjoyable activities. In addition, ELS programme is to instill interest in the children to read and speak in English, as well as to understand what is being read. The ELS programme is also conducted in the *Balairaya* by the other FELDA facilitators selected by the management. The activities are a step higher than that of ELK programme activities, which include reading, listening, speaking and writing skills.

2.2.3 English Literacy Stage 2

English Literacy Stage 2 is for children of year 3, 4, and 5. The aim is similar to that of ELS 1. ELS 2 is handled by school teachers. The activities of the programme is a step higher than that of ELS 1 and so is the language.

2.2 Motivational Talks for Parents on How to Provide Conducive Learning Environment At Home To Sustain The Learning Of English

Excellence in education begins at home. Parents are the children's first teacher as well as facilitator and motivator. Parents should play their roles to lead their children into a productive daily activities, which are geared towards acquiring knowledge. Parents should also be proactive to facilitate and motivate their children to get them ready for the examination.

In a study on family literacy at Felda Seriting, Negeri Sembilan, in 1993 by a group of researchers with the aim to improve literacy among the preschool children of the FELDA settlement, revealed that settlers face a number of problems concerning their children's literacy development in their mother tongue. One of the problems identified in the study is the lack of study area in the homes of settlers which can be used as study areas be it for reading or doing homework by the children. Other findings revealed that there is a lack of awareness on the part of the parents on how to guide their children to effectively use their time wisely. In addition, parents do not know the ways to encourage reading among their children, and the children are not motivated to read.

When it comes to reading and learning English, it is observed that the reading situation is more or less similar to the findings above. Children are not guided on ways to spend their time productively at home. Reading English books at home is almost non-existent and bringing English books home for home reading too is not a practice. There has been no effort from the parents to support the learning of English at home. The only time that the children are exposed to English is during English classes in school. Even then, with a classroom of 40 odd children, from the 5 periods of English per week in their syllabus, hardly much of the time the children had the opportunity to use the language.

The English language lecturers involved in this project gave motivational talks to the settlers on the importance of English and the need to support the learning of the language by their children through providing conducive learning environment at home. The learning of English can actually start at home even though the parents may not even be able to produce a single word of English. Parents are exposed to ways that they can do to encourage their children to use English at home. One example is the initiative of parents to check on the work that their children had in English classes and to ask the children to repeat the words that they have just learned that day. Parents do not have to become experts in the language, but rather they can act as motivators or facilitators to their children in the process of learning and using the language. Various activities that parents can initiate at home to inculcate interest in the language range from having scrabble competition amongst sibling and friends, to identifying and labeling of items found around the house which may include the furniture, kitchen utensils and others.

2.4 Workshops for Facilitator of English Literacy Program

The ELK and ELS 1 programmes are run by the FELDA management. The management identified employees and residents of FELDA who can speak and read in English to teach this program. The FELDA managers are also involved in the teaching since most of them have the ability to converse in English, and have gone through tertiary education. They are able to come up with activities for the classes with the help of English teachers in the respective FELDA schemes. The collaborative effort with UTM has enabled the management to invite English language lecturers from the Modern Languages Department to conduct several workshops to train the facilitators in the methods and approaches in the teaching of English. Since the lecturers in the Modern Languages Department have been involved in teaching TESL students in the Faculty of Education, UTM, they have vast knowledge and expertise in both theories and practice. The first workshop, which was conducted in Tenggara Selatan on the 18th of August, 2001 was handled by four lecturers. The topics include 'Theories in Teaching of Language, Preparing Conducive Environment and Activities in the Classroom, and Making Learning the Language Fun Through Games.' The second workshop was conducted in Tenggara Timur 3 on the 11th of August 2002 by the same lecturers. The topics discussed were 'The Big Books Theory and Activities in Class and Using the Computer with the Children.' The lecturers also provided the facilitators with materials which can be used in their literacy programmes. In addition, suggestions on strategies to teach the language were also given.

2.5 Students' Visit to UTM

A one-day visit to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia by 100 year 6 students accompanied by officers from the FELDA schemes is also arranged. The aim of the visit is to introduce them to the different aspects of lives in the university, especially on the importance of English at the university level. The activities of the visit include visiting different faculties and listening to lectures on career prospects of different courses offered by UTM and visiting Perpustakaan Sultanah Zanariah; the university's main library, to instill awareness on the children on how much English is required for one to excel at tertiary level of education. In addition, the students are also taken to the language laboratory where they actually have some hands-on experience in using the computer to learn English through language learning software in the forms of games. Last but not least, during the visit, the children are engaged in yet another language learning activity outside the classroom environment. It is hoped that through the visit, the children get the feel of what it is like to be in a university and what will be required of them while at university. At the same time, they may want to make early preparations, which among others is to be proficient in the English language in order first of all to gain entry to tertiary education and later to excel in their studies.

3.0 THE COLLABORATION/PARTNERSHIP – 9 PRINCIPLES

The Nine Principles of Good Practice have been utilized to inform the study of the practice of successful collaboration between an institution of higher learning and a community. A list of observable behaviors of the participants of the project was created to show examples of the different principles. The following highlight specific behaviors relevant to the Nine Principles of Good Practice, which have been met in the study.

3.1 Principle One: Partners have agreed upon mission, values, goals and measurable outcomes for the partnership.

Mission statements are agreed upon by members. The members developed mission of the project. Participants from both sides reflect a common mission and goals. The goals of the project are to improve the interest among primary school students in the English language and thereby improving their results in the examinations. The participants also expressed the importance of the collaboration and working toward helping the students to be successful in the studies. Outcomes are agreed upon by all members

3.2 Principle Two: The relationship between partners is characterized by mutual trust, respect, genuineness, and commitment.

During meeting and running of the activities in the community, participants talked in polite and courteous manner to one another. Participants refer to each other respectfully using cultural norms of respect when addressing others. Members show up in meetings and contributed to the meetings. Verbal and non-verbal cues, such as smile and laugh were apparent when they discussed in the meetings. The meeting tone was friendly, open and welcoming. Most participants showed the attention and followed the meetings closely.

3.3 Principle Three: The partnership builds upon identified strengths and assets, and addresses areas that need improvement.

As reflected in the minutes of meetings and annual report for the last three years, members identified strengths of both parties, examines issues raised by the other members and set priorities for the future activities, which are different from the past activities. Over the years, several other activities have been carried such as several workshops conducted for the community, such as “The Importance of EQ in management” and leadership seminar for the community leaders.

3.4 Principle Four: The partnership balances power among partners and enables resources among partners to be shared.

Resources and money are shared with to come up with the program. The university provided the materials such as papers, photocopying costs and stationary needed to prepare for the activities to be carried out. The traveling of the university’s students who were the participants to the community were funded by the university, which provided several busses to take them to and from the place of the camps. The university also came up with presents and gifts for the children who excelled in the activities they participated. The community came up with the other needed materials over on their side such as paper file, pen and pencil for the students’ use during the various activities. They also prepared six meals per day for the all the participants in the activities. Parents and community leaders were involved in cooking the meals and drinks. The security of the place of the activities was ensured by the people of the community who conducted round the clock surveillance of the area.

3.5 Principle Five: There is clear, open and accessible communication between partners, making it an ongoing priority to listen to each need, develop a common language, and validate/clarify the meaning of terms.

During the meetings and camps, there seemed to be a sense of clear and open communication between the participants of the collaboration. Each member was allowed to raise any issue during meeting and whenever the need arises. Any issue raised is discussed at length and in details without being put aside. The participants also keep each others' phone number, fax and emails. The chairman of the meetings asked each participant regarding any issue or questions. Decisions were made based on consensus.

3.6 Principle Six: Roles, norms, and processes for the partnership are established with the input and agreement of all partners.

Leaders for both parties were appointed from the people who are involved in the project from the beginning. The members of the partnership have formed norms about the communications. Agenda of meeting were distributed at the start of a meeting. However, members can raise new issues during the meetings. The Malay cultural norms were adopted that decision be made through collaboration and group agreement.

3.7 Principle Seven: There is feedback to, among, and from all stakeholders in the partnership, with the goal of continuously improving the partnership and its outcomes.

The meetings and camps are packed with open discussion of ideas and opinion between participants. Basically the aims of meetings center around how to improve the students' grade in English and what can be done by the community to help. Issues regarding how to improve the collaborations were also discussed. The attendance from different community leaders reflect the openness of the meetings who are genuinely interested in helping their children excel in English.

3.8 Principle Eight: Partners share the credit for the partnership's accomplishments.

The partnership has of course benefited both parties in different ways as mentioned above. When they talked about the accomplishments, each party did not try to take the credit. They share the credit of successful collaboration as their accomplishment. Each group tried to highlight the contribution of the other party, and any contributions from both parties were fairly and equally acknowledged.

3.9 Principle Nine: Partnerships take time to develop and evolve over time

The collaboration has evolved from just a language camp for the children to instill interest in the language with the hope that they would create the interest to further pursue and learn the language. Over the years, the collaboration has gone into more elaborate activities such as training of the literacy facilitators who teach at the community kindergarten and nursery, workshop for parents on what they can do and provide their children who are learning English at home, students' visit to the university, workshop for teachers on using games with children in classes, leadership seminar for community leaders and IQ seminar for FELDA management. The community involved in the project has also been expanded to include two other neighboring communities. There has been discussion on having the collaboration to go on to a higher level towards the national level to include other communities.

4/0 CONCLUSION

Promoting and sustaining literacy and interest in English among students in rural areas are not easy to do. With all the constraints and not-so-conducive environment, efforts from all parties, parents, community, schools and institutions of higher learning need to be coordinated in order to ensure that students are given ample opportunity to practice and use the language all the time. All this while, the burden has been put on the shoulder of teachers to do all they can to teach the children in school. Actually, the time the students spend out of school in a day is more than the time they spend in school. Therefore, the people outside the school have all the responsibility to ensure that the learning in schools is further supported outside the schools. What the FELDA Johor Bahru management has done to ensure that the learning of English in school is further sustained outside the school is the right way in the direction to produce proficient students in English. The initiatives to involve English language lecturers and TESL students from an institution of higher learning to plan and start various literacy programmes in the community should be seen as a model of smart partnership between higher learning institution and rural community in instilling interest in the language. In the end, WINWIN situation does take place.

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