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'BERTEHTUH' ENGLISH:
THE EXPERIENCE OF A TEMIAR GIRL IN ACQUIRING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Despite being a community that is often associated with the terms 'illiterate', 'marginalised' and 'educationally disadvantaged', certain indigenous students demonstrate positive developments in their second language proficiency (English). This issue creates a centre of attention as it can highlight suggestions to better the education of indigenous people in Malaysia. Having this in mind, a study was conducted in a remote indigenous school situated in the jungle of Banjaran Titiwangsa. In an attempt to investigate why the subject, an indigenous student of the Temiar tribe, is able to demonstrate better language proficiency compared to her classmates, a micro-ethnographic research that employed interviews as its instrument was conducted. Themes are generated through thematic analysis where this study concludes that the following three factors have hugely contributed to her success: (1) positive teacher (2) integrative-instrumental motivation and (3) supportive environment at home. This study also highlights conflict in culture between teachers and the indigenous tribe which is a result of the parenting styles, practiced by the indigenous parents, instead of their culture as claimed by the teacher. This paper brings to the fore the importance of teacher's attitude and parenting awareness in empowering the process of learning English in this school.

Keywords: English as the Second Language (ESL), indigenous people, individual differences, parenting styles, Temiar

1.0 INTRODUCTION

'Bertehtuh' is an action word in the Temiar language which means 'to speak'. Ever since education stepped into the community, the phrase *'Bertehtuh English'* has started to become common among Temiar children. This is more apparent when the younger generation of Temiar people utilise Facebook and other social applications in their daily life. Teaching English to indigenous children however comes with great responsibility. What is more, for years, they have been associated with the terms 'illiterate', 'marginalised' and 'educationally disadvantaged' (Johari and Nazri, 2006; Frigo et al., 2004; Hanlen, 2010). The Composite Score for Primary School Report (Ministry of Education, 2010) also reports that a good number of indigenous schools are either in band 5, 6 or 7 which is equivalent to poor performance and require further support. Whilst it is true that indigenous people are still lagging in terms of education achievement, this does not mean their community is absent from successful stories.

The Department of Special Education (Ministry of Education, 2006) has reported that there are 395 indigenous people who have successfully made their way to the tertiary level in 2006; 302 people doing diploma, 88 people doing degree, 3 people doing master's degree and 2 people doing doctorate studies; and to date this number has improved. The participation of indigenous students at tertiary institutions without any doubt requires a certain level of English as a requirement in their learning process. This progress also reflects that they have benefited from the English language instruction both at the primary and secondary levels. This case is also similar to the school that I was attached to until 2 years ago. There are certain students from the indigenous community who acquire English better than others.

My teaching experience and their successful stories have elevated my curiosity to investigate why certain indigenous students show positive development in learning English compared to other children of the same community; it is important to take note that English is also not the community's first or second language, but rather the third. Since this paper believes that all children regardless of their ethnicity can succeed in learning a second language, a study was conducted to explore factors that have a major influence on Temiar students. In order to guide the process of writing this paper, two research questions were developed as follows: (1) what are the main factors that contribute to the success of the indigenous-student in this research in learning English as her second language? And (2) how do these factors contribute to her success in language learning?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Individual differences among learners

Having taught indigenous children for five years, I have learned that unless we are of the same cultural background, teaching indigenous students will be challenging because we practice different beliefs, language and concerns. However, the differences are not unusual in the world of English as a Second Language (ESL) and rarely seen as barriers for language acquisition. Most literature in ESL has classified this situation as 'individual differences' (Harmer, 2007a; Brown, 2000). Holt (2001) explains that students are different in terms of their intelligence, language aptitude, motivation and situational anxiety. Her study is based on the theoretical framework proposed by Gardner (1982, quoted in Holt, 2001) who further describes other factors such as social and cultural milieu, the setting and learning context, and linguistic outcome. Skehan (1989), Ellis (1997) and Robinson (2002) in their studies have also enlisted age, personality and gender as themes for individual differences. Indeed, there are more on this matter but in this research I shall only discuss age, motivation and social culture as I believe these are the necessary issues that should be understood when teaching in indigenous communities.

2.2 Age

Discussion on age has been approached in different ways by many ESL experts but what age can tell us about our students is the core issue in this paper. Harmer (2007a) explicates that age is a major factor in deciding how and what to teach. People of different ages have different needs, competences, and cognitive skills. Dunn (1983) explains that age represents the development of humans and it can be discussed in four main areas: (1) language, (2) cognitive (3) emotional and (4) physical development. Through these four aspects, he draws several general concepts of young learners, as follows:

1. The degree to which the children can use the L1 will reflect on the children's ability to acquire the L2
2. The concepts that have been learned in L1 can be transferred to L2.
3. Children need more experience and time to learn a completely new concept.
4. Children's 'readiness' will help them to learn a certain concept.
5. A class as one unit will not give a child the individual attention he needs.
6. Children's mood and temperament will determine the number of tasks they can learn at one time.
7. It is impossible for a child to learn everything perfectly in each lesson.
8. Muscular development affects a child's ability to read, write, listen and speak.
9. Activities need to give children an opportunity to move around within the classroom.

Dunn's (1983) general concepts show that young learners are different compared to adult learners. Harmer (2007a) further explains that adult learners are different because they are able to engage in abstract tasks, have a whole range of life experiences to draw upon, have expectations and patterns of learning, more discipline than other age groups, have better understanding on why they are learning and what they want to get from the process of learning and are able to sustain and maintain their level of motivation. All the aforementioned information is important to understand because Moon (2005) stresses that through age, teachers should be able to predict the extent in which their students can perform and thus set realistic learning objectives for their students to achieve.

Setting realistic learning objectives is however a conflict to some indigenous schools (Hanlen, 2010; Warid, 2015). Certain indigenous children start Standard One without adequate basic knowledge on letters, numbers, and the ability to read. This has often put teachers teaching in indigenous schools under a dilemma as they have to combat between the reality of their situation and the standards set in the curriculum. However, if teachers fail to realise the responsibility of recognising the needs of their students and the importance to start at the right starting point, they might end up misunderstanding the purpose of the curriculum itself (Warid, 2015).

2.3 Motivation

Pintrich and Schunk (2002) delineate motivation as a force that energises, sustains and directs behavior towards a goal. Although in general motivation is a significant contributor to language learning success, findings from previous research (Mohamad Johdi and Abdul Razak, 2009; Kamarulzaman, 2008) reveal that this factor is still lacking among indigenous students. Fontana (1995) groups motivation into two categories; the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic refers to motivation which comes from the individual while extrinsic refers to motivations which are imposed upon him by the environment (Harmer, 2007b). What influence the intrinsic motivation can be seen in term of students' self-esteem; their readiness to learn the target language. Extrinsic in contrast is influenced by a myriad variables such as individual preferences, peer pressure, teachers' support and others (Fontana, 1995). To further discuss this issue, we shall look at how different advocates approach motivation in order to support the process of language learning (see Fig. 1).
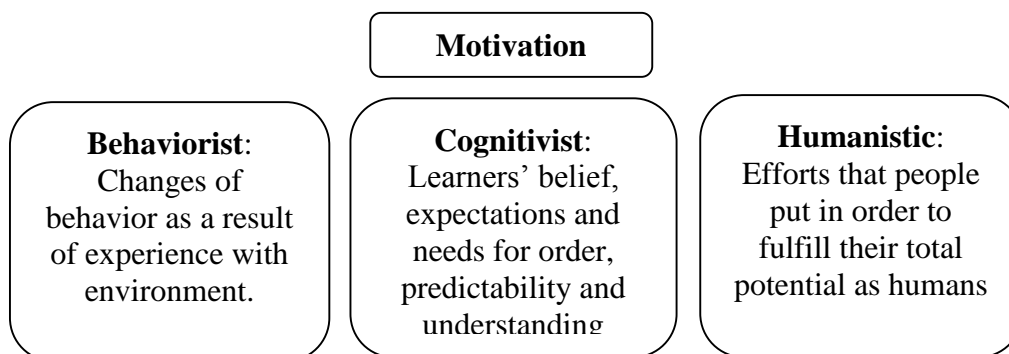
Figure 1: Motivation from three main theory perspectives (source: Eggen and Kauchak, 2004)

Just like the different notions of motivation, each theory suggests different techniques on how to motivate students. Behaviorist advocates suggest teachers reward when students show some progress in learning and penalise when misbehavior happens. The cognitivist supports techniques that trigger students' ability to think or self-reflect and the humanistic believes in the word 'love', that no matter how bad a student behaves, he or she should be considered worthy and support should be given (Harmer, 2007b; Brown, 2000). Through consistent motivation, certain positive characteristics can be traced in learners such as being active, high self-esteem, positive in dealing with mistakes and ready to learn (Brown, 2000; Fontana, 1995). Those are some of the criteria of a good language learner which should exist in every student (Prodromou, 1995).

2.4 Social and cultural milieu

Through age and motivation, we should have the basic idea on what young or adult learners can perform in language learning. However, this issue is rather convoluted because factors of individual differences are interrelated and hardly work in isolation. The dynamic structure of the indigenous community, namely their culture, can either be a positive or negative factor in language learning (Fontana, 1995). Hence there is a need for teachers teaching in this special community to take the initiative to understand the social circle that surrounds the school. Eggen and Kauchak (2004) discuss issue regarding English in a multicultural classroom in four areas, as follows:

1. Attitudes and values: Native people strive to protect their identity and often see language and school success as examples of cultural inversion. Students' attitudes and values that they develop at home will determine whether they will embrace those examples positively or reject them in order to maintain their social status within their society.
2. Adult-child interaction: Children from different cultures also learn to interact with adults in different ways; at times the practice echoes with the one used at school and sometimes it does not.
3. Classroom organisation: Certain cultures value collaboration but being competitive is also needed in learning. Whilst students are used to group success, they also need to understand that individual achievement is important for their development.
4. School communication: Parent's involvement in their children's education is very important. Whether the school culture, which stresses values of education, matches or mismatches with the one held at the student's home depends on how supportive the parents are towards their children's education.

The roles of the teacher in understanding this issue and plan actions to accommodate the indigenous students' needs are crucial in determining whether the native people can succeed in second language learning. Gay (1997, quoted in Eggen and Kauchak, 2004), in response to this issue, has introduced the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) strategies. It is a strategy where teachers acknowledge the cultural differences in the classroom and create teaching strategies that cater to this diversity. The strategies proposed are as follows:

1. Demonstrate caring to all students by giving them your time and showing personal interest in them.
2. Involve all students in learning activities as equally as possible.
3. Use a variety of teaching methods to accommodate different cultural learning styles.
4. Communicate that you value the contributions that all cultures can bring to school and society and
5. Provide opportunities for students with different backgrounds to interact and work together.

Indeed, there are a myriad of suggestions and guides on how to engage with marginalised communities. However, from the perspectives of individual differences, tying up all the factors with the culture-knot seems to be an important thing that needs to be done by teachers who are teaching in a different cultural setting than their own. This, from this research point of view, is the core issue in teaching indigenous students in Malaysia and yet it is being neglected by some.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research in the form of micro-ethnographic design. The design is chosen because it focuses on a particular aspect of the community researched within a short period of time (Bryman, 2012). The duration of data collection was within 4 months, done between July and October 2015. The use of qualitative data in this study, involving observation of an individual, a group, a school or a community, has been supported by many experts (Bell, 2005; Merriam, 1998).

3.1 Location

This research was conducted in one of the indigenous schools in Gua Musang, Kelantan. The school is a remote school, situated deep in the jungle of Banjaran Titiwangsa. The indigenous community that resides along the way to school is Temiar, one of the indigenous sub-tribes of the 'Senoi' family. The distance from the main road is 75KM; and 95KM from Gua Musang city centre. The condition of the road is of off-road, where it is often monopolised by logging lorries or heavy vehicles. The school was founded in April 1994 by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (hereafter JKOA) but was entrusted to the Ministry of Education later in 1996.

3.2 Sampling

The sample in this study is of purposive sampling where selection is made using certain criteria in order to answer the research objectives (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). This is done by selecting one student who portrayed good language development based on her or his monthly test. Based on the charts produced by the school, a 12-year-old girl (hereafter Masdido) who showed consistent performance in three English tests was selected. Her performance in monthly tests (UBB) is tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Masdido's Monthly Test Scores

Tests	UBB1	UBB2	UBB3
Scores	50	55	53

The term outstanding used in this study refers to the fact that she consistently passed three English tests with marks higher than the others. This also makes her the suitable sample for this case study. Bell (2005) however explains that case studies require a variation of input for critical analysis. Therefore, this research has taken initiative to interview her father, two Temiar elders and a teacher who has been teaching in this school for 10 years to enrich the data. This is also an attempt to triangulate the data as to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

3.3 Ethical issues

Since this research involves a student aged 12, certain ethical procedures were taken into consideration in order to avoid the data from being manipulated (Merriam, 1998). First, the involvement of the student was only done after school, and the parents signed the ethical form, giving permission to the researcher to observe and interview the informer. Second, the names used in this study, such as Masdido, Abok and Lily, are pseudonym and do not represent the real people. Third, the name of the school and area will be written as School B and Pos B due to the request made by the school head teacher.

3.4 Data collection

For data collection, this case study employs a semi-structured interview as the research instrument. This instrument allows flexibility for the sample to exchange information between interviewer and interviewee (Merriam, 1998). A set of questions was prepared beforehand based on the research objectives. The questions were developed based on three situations: (1) in the classroom (2) at home and (3) personal interests where they reflect the routine of the Temiar children in this area. The interview was then done partially in the Temiar language and the Malay language. Based on her responses, another set of questions was developed for other samples; her father, the teacher and 2 Temiar elders. This is to obtain further explanation on any appealing information or emerging issues (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Our interview sessions were tape-recorded as a part of professional practice and each interview consisted of 15 to 20 minutes of conversation. The recordings were then transcribed for data analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

Merriam (1998) suggests that themes, meanings or concepts to answer a qualitative research emerge from thematic analysis. For the first round of analysis, the data are mapped against these themes: (1) teachers (2) friends (3) personal and (4) parents. These factors are chosen based on the factors that often influence students' participation in learning (Harmer, 2007a). The data analysis then started by transcribing the conversation between interviewer and the informer. The transcribed conversation was then validated by a teacher who is fluent in the Temiar language. Then several key-notes were made based on the research objectives. Each key-note was then sorted and grouped into key areas or themes mentioned earlier. After this process, the grouped data are re-analysed in order to avoid overlapping. Finally, discussions are made on the themes. These procedures follow the stages of thematic analysis proposed by Merriam (1998). Through these analysis procedures, three factors that contributed to Masdido's success were identified. These factors are positive teachers, personal goals and supportive environment at home

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 Positive teachers

One of the studies discussing English language acquisition among indigenous students is by Airil Haimi and Muhammad Aizad (2010). Conducted in two states, Perak and Pahang, their findings reveal that teachers have become a factor that encumbers the learning process. They further elucidate that the problem exists because some teachers do not recognise the indigenous students' needs. In this research, however, Masdido has identified her teacher as one of the factors why she is motivated to learn English.

> "…I like my teacher … we always do fun things …. we sing … we play
> games … and he teaches me how to score in examination …"
>
> (Masdido)

As Zaleha (1995) elucidates, good teachers can influence students' achievement and individual development. Masdido's teacher does this by reducing the culture gap between him and his students. As Masdido states:

> "He learned my language… so… I learn English la"
>
> (Masdido)

Masdido's English language teacher also often expresses positive remarks regarding his students and teaching environment. Teacher A said:

> "Indigenous students have the right to bring about changes to their community,
> so as an educator, I always think of the best way they can accept English as their
> second language. I found that by connecting English to their mother tongue…
> the process became easier. That's why I also make an effort to… learn their
> language. They'll respect you for doing that"
>
> (Teacher A)

Whilst this study seeks to highlight the roles of the teacher, Masdido did not hesitate to agree that teachers used to become a factor that demotivated her.

> "Yes… there is … he (a different teacher) always asked us to read every
> day… hmmm reading the same thing … 'My name is Anjang, I am 10 years
> old, I go to school' again and again… he often scolded us… during
> examinations he would write answers on the board… I don't like that… I
> don't like him"
>
> (Masdido)

Another teacher from School B, who has been serving this school for 10 years, when asked about this matter responded, as follows:

> "It is true that there are certain teachers who fail to accept the fact of being
> posted to this environment. Sometimes, they express their stress by being absent
> from the classroom, being half-hearted in lesson planning and try to distance
> themselves from their students. However, I must stress that this happens only to
> certain teachers… there are many good teachers as well"
>
> (Teacher B)

Marcredi (2004) in her study on indigenous education in Canada describes this issue as 'positive and negative teachers'; positive teachers lead students to success whilst negative

teachers make students withdraw from learning. As she points out, negative teachers are those who fail to understand their students' culture and are not willing to accept the differences.

4.2 Integrative and instrumental motivations

Apart from the previous factor, it is also interesting to note how Masdido's ambition has helped to retain her interest in learning English. Interested in the teaching profession, this research went further by asking her for the reasons why she is interested to teach English.

> "I know… nowadays English is important… it's a cool language… that's why
> I want to learn English and teach English…"
>
> (Masdido)

Her reasons can be associated with integrative motivation. Through integrative motivation Masdido learns the target language with a purpose of becoming a part of the society in which the language is utilised (Holt, 2001). Although Masdido does not show any intention of immersing into the target language society, she shows a desire of becoming bilingual. Benson (1991) suggests that becoming bilingual is also a part of integrative motivation in the EFL context. Her next answers also show her desire in learning English, as follows:

> "I want to bring my family… to Gua Musang … live in Gua Musang… go to a
> Christian school in Pahang just like Lily… learn there… English is important
> there"
>
> (Masdido)

Her desire to bring her family into a better place and to study in the Christian school can be referred to as instrumental motivation. Hudson (2000, quoted in Holt, 2001) describes this as a situation where language is learned to obtain something critical or concrete; for example, to gain social status, good grades or applying for jobs.

It is also interesting to highlight the existence of a role model in Masdido's life. The girl named 'Lily' can be described as the 'minority role model' (Eggen and Kauchak, 2004, p134.). Minority role models are important as they exert a message that indigenous students can succeed without losing their ethnicity or cultural heritage (Eggen and Kauchak, 2004). Having both, the integrative and instrumental motivation, as well as the minority role model as the external motivation, helped Masdido to set aim and develop reasons why she should learn English.

4.3 Supportive environment at home

At the early stage of this research, I was concerned whether 'negative peer pressure', as claimed by Reid (1990) in his study, existed among indigenous students of School B. However, in the interview, Masdido disagrees but makes a special remark

> "No … friends are good … they don't disturb me… but they often ask for my
> homework … to copy (laughing) … I never give mine … they will get from
> Abok (laughing)"
>
> (Masdido)

Masdido's response on the issue earlier is concurrent with several studies (Galu, 1998; Brown, 2000). However, she raises another issue concerning the importance of being independent and confident language learners. This is shown by how she disagrees with her friends' action. Eggen and Kauchak (2004) claim that independent language learners are often a result of parent's involvement in their children's development. According to Masdido:

> "Sometimes… I use English at home… my father can speak… just little
> English… he buys me books. Sometimes he helps me to read books".

<div align="right">(Masdido)</div>

Her response that her father can speak English further elevates curiosity in this case study because through my experience, having indigenous parents in Pos B that try to communicate with their children in English is an exceptional situation. I believe this condition occurs due to a factor which is later found in the interview.

> "My father works for the church… they always come to our house … err for
> … Thursday's prayer"

<div align="right">(Masdido)</div>

The involvement of Christian missionaries in indigenous education has been recorded by Jensz (2012a, 2012b) where Christian missionary groups have been described as a major provider of education in the colonial world. Masdido's father explains:

> "… sometimes they brought books … they taught me how to read … then I
> teach my children… I want my children to be able to read in English… the
> Bible is in English…yes…"

<div align="right">(Masdido's father)</div>

Apart from books and guidance given to the father, activities done during their Thursday prayer also contributes to Masdido's success in learning English.

> "… hmmm no… eh!... yes… sometimes we sing Malay songs… sometimes
> English… it's fun!"

<div align="right">(Masdido)</div>

In my opinion, the Thursday prayer provides experience and opportunity for Masdido to relate what she has learned at school with the activities after the Thursday prayer. I believe the non-existence of negative peer pressure and supportive environment that she receives at home, either from her father or the missionary group, are reasons why Masdido excels in her English learning.

4.4 Emerging issues: Between parenting styles and culture

In this study, I was introduced to a law practiced by the Temiar tribe known as the Law of 'Sayyet'. The term 'sayyet' (pronounced as SAR-YET) is a Temiar word for 'children'. Therefore, this law is about the children of Temiar. I believe this law is interesting due to the conflict of belief between 'Teacher A' and Temiar elders, as follows:

> "… there is! It is known as the law of Sayyet. It is a law that 'children do what
> they want to do'. Of course… I question this law… because it can be
> interpreted freely. In this school, attendance and achievement are interrelated
> and still a problem… when I ask the parents why they are not sending their
> children to school… their replies would be like 'I already asked him to go but
> he didn't want'....err 'what can I do, they are still children'… 'let them
> be…they are kids'. I think this has something to do with the law that I
> mentioned earlier"

<div align="right">(Teacher A)</div>

However, according to one of the elders, the Sayyet Law is a version at the other end of a continuum.

> "Hmm… the Sayyet Law should be in the sense that… a child should be
> respectful to his elders… they should listen to us… like that … yes… like
> that... of course it also means they need to go to school and learn"

<div align="center">33</div>

<div align="right">(Elder B)</div>

Even though Elder B denies the link between poor performance and the law, both elders agree that most parents in this tribe have less control of their children; allowing their children to decide what they want to do unilaterally.

> "Yes… yes… it's true that… err… parents in our tribe … cannot control their children (laughing)… only some can"

<div align="right">(Elder A)</div>

Having information taken from both the teacher and the elders, this research concludes that what currently happens in this society has more to do with the parenting styles rather than the law from Temiar's culture. Eggen and Kauchak (2004) enlisted four types of parenting styles and their effects on the children's characteristics (see Table 2).

Table 2: Parenting styles

Interaction styles	Parental Characteristics	Child Characteristics
Authoritative	Firm and caring. Explain reasons for rules and consistent.	High self-esteem, confident and secure
Authoritarian	Stress conformity. Do not encourage verbal give-and-take	Withdrawn, worry more about pleasing the parent. Lack social skills.
Permissive	Give children total freedom, little expectations and make few demands on children.	Immature, lack self-control, impulsive and unmotivated
Uninvolved	Have little interest in their child's life	Lack of self-control and long term goals.

Based on the interview, this research assumes that most parents in Pos B are either 'permissive' or 'uninvolved'. This situation is contradicted by Masdido's father, where he plays his role as a father actively by supporting his daughter's education. As concluded by many experts, children's grades, motivation, and relationship with peers and teachers will develop positively if parents play their roles properly (Eggen and Kauchak, 2004; Woolfolk, 2004, Fontana, 1995). Masdido's father, which I believe to be an 'authoritative' father, is a good example to support this claim.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Through this study, I believe that teachers teaching in indigenous schools or in different cultural settings should not divorce themselves from understanding issues in individual differences. This issue is just as important as other subject knowledge in English Language Teaching (ELT). This study has shown that the positive teacher, supportive environment and motivated learner are the major contributors to Masdido's success in learning English. If she consistently receives the support, I believe she might be able to achieve her dream and succeed. She might be the first person in her village to become a teacher. This study also finds that it is crucial to highlight that negative-teachers and uninvolved parents are negative contributors that hinder

the process of learning English in the school. Although changes on both factors would be longitudinal, we can expect more positive development in indigenous education, not just in English learning but others as well, if both issues are handled properly.

Discussion on individual differences opens opportunity for teachers teaching in indigenous schools to better understand their students; especially issues related to culture. For example, I first felt offended when my students use the lexical *'namte'* in our conversation because in my culture it is considered impolite for young children to curse; or even between adults or children. Having understood the degree of the word, provided me reasons why it is used in conversation and by doing this I have managed to avoid from being ethnocentric and criticizing their practice.

For future research, this study would like to suggest several possible areas to those who are keen to investigate. The areas are as follows:
1. A comparative study between Malaysian indigenous students and indigenous students from another country in learning a second language; factors that motivate them or challenges they face in learning English.
2. The implementation of Malaysia English KSSR (Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools) in the indigenous community. A study to what extent the new standard curriculum responds to the needs of indigenous pupils.
3. A longitudinal study on indigenous pupils' reading age and second language comprehension development.
4. The social support for teachers who are teaching in indigenous schools that are situated in challenging environment (see Rashid, Rahman, Rahman, 2016).

I hope through findings of future research, more positive stories can be highlighted from indigenous communities to shed off the current stigma being given to them. At present, suffice it to say that to a certain extent, there are factors that stimulate indigenous students in Kelantan to *'Bertehtuh English'* as their other language and it is without doubt that satisfactory school learning is unlikely to take place in the absence of sufficient motivation to learn (Fontana, 1995).

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