

Understanding Language Barriers in Indigenous (*Orang Asli*) Education: A Systematic Review Approach

¹Puteri Aini Binti Megat Yusop, ²Mohd Mahzan Bin Awang, ³Jamsari Bin Alias

¹Faculty of Education, National University of Malaysia

²Faculty Of Education, National University of Malaysia

³CITRA, National University of Malaysia

Abstract

Orang Asli is the native people of Peninsula Malaysia. Learning of Bahasa Melayu (National Language of Malaysia) and English as the main languages in school can be quite challenging to many of their children. This review explores research from 2017–2025 and identifies reasons why learning Malay and English in school is challenging for Orang Asli children. A review of existing research from 2017–2025 was conducted to highlight language-related issues affecting Orang Asli students. To begin with, the majority of Orang Asli students come to school with very little exposure to and experience with the National Language - Bahasa Melayu. Secondly their culture does not relate to the way of teaching. Third, they do not get good home based reading and writing support. Fourth, national education plans do not exactly align with the actual needs of Indigenous children. The children of the Orang Asli find it hard to navigate around such issues hence performing poorly in school. They can lose their inspiration and motivation, they may trail behind their education or they drop out. There are certain crucial changes that are to be introduced according to the review. The languages of the students which are Bahasa Melayu and indigenous should be spoken in schools. Their culture and traditions should be incorporated in such lessons. The teachers are supposed to be trained on the awareness of understanding how the Orang Asli students learn. Learning must become more family and community centered. Such transformations can render Orang Asli learners effective and propagate their culture.

Keywords: *Orang Asli, Indigenous education, language barriers, bilingual education, culturally responsive teaching.*

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a land of cultural diversity and it has a very heterogeneous collection of ethnic groups with the most visible being the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Driving through, one of the forgotten communities is the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, the *Orang Asli*. The *Orang Asli* do not belong to one ethnic group but include several ethnic groups with *Negrito*, *Senoi*, and *Proto* Malays being the most representative ones. These populations are characterised by varied languages, cultures, ways of life and even physical appearances.

Historically, the *Orang Asli* is well preceding the Malays who came into Malaysia in the 1400s, something that is barely represented in discussions of the development of Malaysia. In spite of the historical depth, *Orang Asli* are usually considered to be marginalized and or excluded in the mainstream society. One principle contributor to this marginalization is the fact that they have difficulty with the *Malay* language, which is normally introduced to them only when they start their formal schooling. This exposure late in life erects a barrier because *Malay* then becomes a more of a hindrance than a means of acquiring knowledge with their performance at school dropping and their access towards the national curriculum, which is mostly taught in Malay, getting curtailed.

The problem in Malaysia is not peculiar. In other regions of the world, indigenous students encounter similar problems, e.g. in Honduras. Max Benjamin (2024) also emphasizes that language barrier also affects the learning achievement of such communities significantly. When educational systems cannot take into consideration the language and cultural differences of the indigenous students, it not only fails to serve them, it serves to underline educational inequality and thus it becomes more difficult to enable indigenous students to flourish.

When it comes to addressing the *Orang Asli*, and other indigenous populations around the world, it is important to overcome any language barriers so that they too have an equal chance of succeeding at school and be full members of the society. The education systems must devise means of being more accommodative and supportive of these groups of persons as their diverse backgrounds are crucial in creating a more equal world.

2. Background & Context

2.1 Indigenous Population in Malaysia

The *Orang Asli* are the Malaysian aborigines who inhabited the Malay Peninsula, the first people in that kingdom. Their culture is too traditional and their values and norms are passed by generation after generation. *Orang Asli* has had a firm sense of identity, which is based on customs and beliefs held by their ancestors that have defined their societies and day to day lives.

In Malaysia, *Orang Asli* can be summarized under three groups; *Proto-Malay*, *Senoi* and *Negrito*. Under these groups are 18 different sub ethnic tribes. Groups of Negritos include *Kentaq*, *Kensiu*, *Lanoh*, *Mendriq*, *Jahai* and *Bateq*. The Senoi group consists of *Temiar*, *Semoq Beri*, *Semai*, *Jah Hut* and *Che Wong* and *Mah Meri* tribes. Proto-Malay is a group of tribes the *Semelai*, *Temuan*, *Jakun*, *Orang Kanaq*, *Orang Kuala* and *Orang Seletar*.

All these 18 sub-ethnic groups together comprise 0.8 percent of the entire Peninsular Malaysian population. In Sarawak, the indigenous communities are usually termed as Natives. This incorporates groupings like the *Iban*, *Bidayuh*, *Kenyah*, *Kayan* and *Kelabit*, among others. Collectively, they constitute about 50 percent of the population in Sarawak of about 1.2 million. The *Anak Negeri* Indigenous groups in Sabah amount to 39 ethnic groups that include the *Dusun*, *Murut*, and *Bajau*. The distribution of these groups comprises approximately 62 percent of the population of Sabah or totaling 2.1 million people.

These Indigenous populations are not only a big percentage of the Malaysian population but also living witness to its rich cultural heritage. Their varied cultures, languages and living styles ensure that Malaysia has even more identities to play with, even though they are experiencing difficulty in continuity of their cultural activities in a modernizing society.

2.2 Educational Challenges of Orang Asli in Malaysia

One such critical issue, which the *Orang Asli* community faces, is the high-dropout rate among their children and it is not just a random thing, but a sign of an inner flaw. Nor Fariha Aniza et al., (2016) states that the dropout rate shows the presence of systemic problems that are usually ignored. The unstable lifestyle of many *Orang Asli* children and their parents, who often do not have stable jobs (Paiz Hassan & Mohd Anuar Ramli, 2020), occupy other areas rather than formal education.

This inattention towards education is even exacerbated with low literacy levels and bad academic achievement. Multiple related reasons result in such challenges, with location being one of the most critical areas; *Orang Asli* settlements are remote. The physical access to these communities is usually poor hindering the presence of children in schools. According to Samat (2018), poverty and poor health conditions are associated with inappropriate transport and educational facilities among others, making access to education a problem. Not surprisingly therefore, *Orang Asli* children are unable to cope with school work in mainstream schools and as such they fall behind their peers.

This can be seen in the Annual Report (2021), which indicates the alarming trends both in enrolment and performances among *Orang Asli* learners in schools. The first factor indicated by Mohd Mahzan et al., (2022) is chronic absenteeism that can be said to be one of the causes of poor educational results. More critically, *Orang Asli* children have a much broader dropout rate as compared to the national average (Noor Hanim et al., 2020; Wong & Abdillah, 2018).

Another determining factor that cannot be ignored is geographical isolation. Most of the *Orang Asli* live in forested rural areas and reaching schools is a logistic nightmare. In a report updated by UNICEF Malaysia (2021) inadequate access to educational facilities particularly within the local communities is one of the biggest factors that either prevent *Orang Asli* children to enrol to or drop out of school. In a bid to mitigate this, the report recommends the building of academic facilities that are nearer to the *Orang Asli* community as one measure to improve access to education as it is an important step towards giving these children a chance to achieve.

2.3 The Educational Effects of Language Barriers Among Orang Asli Students in Malaysia.

Language proficiency is crucial for academic success, as it forms the foundation for learning and understanding. Since *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language) was officially established as Malaysia's national language in 1957, its role as the primary language of communication has grown significantly. While Malay remains the national language,

Malaysia continues to preserve its diverse native languages. However, for the *Orang Asli* community, language presents a significant barrier to educational success.

For many *Orang Asli* children, *Bahasa Melayu* is not the first language spoken at home. Instead, they grow up speaking various Indigenous dialects, such as *Temiar*, *Semai*, and *Jahai*, which differ greatly from the national language in both structure and vocabulary. This language mismatch, as noted by Nicholas (2010), leads to difficulties in understanding classroom lessons, reading materials, and assessments. As a result, *Orang Asli* children often struggle to keep up with their peers, affecting their overall academic performance.

The challenges extend beyond academics. The lack of proficiency in *Bahasa Melayu* contributes to low self-esteem, disengagement from school, and poor communication between students and teachers. *Orang Asli* students, feeling alienated in an environment that does not reflect their cultural or linguistic background, often struggle to express themselves confidently. According to Mohd Mahzan et al. (2022), many of these students are reluctant to ask for help when they don't understand the lessons, which only deepens the cycle of underachievement and increases the likelihood of dropping out.

Efforts to address these language barriers have been made, but they often lack consistency and widespread implementation. Some pilot programs and NGO-led initiatives have tried to incorporate bilingual education or culturally relevant content, but these approaches have not yet been fully integrated into the national education system. UNICEF Malaysia (2021) advocates for mother tongue-based multilingual education, as it has been shown to improve literacy and school participation among Indigenous children.

Until Malaysia's education policy is reformed to better accommodate the linguistic diversity of the *Orang Asli* community, language will continue to be a structural barrier, preventing these children from achieving their full potential and perpetuating educational inequality. Without targeted language support and culturally responsive teaching strategies, the gap will remain, leaving the *Orang Asli* at a disadvantage in their educational journey.

3.0 Methodology

This review analyses qualitative and quantitative studies published between 2017 and 2025 that focus on language barriers in *Orang Asli* education. The selected studies employ various research designs, including ethnographic case studies, interviews, and surveys, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

Table 1: *Orang Asli* Qualitative and Quantitative Studies Published Between 2017 and 2025

No	Title	Authors	Journal	Year
1.	Educational Challenges among <i>Orang Asli</i> Children in Malaysia	Azmira Maulod et al.	International Journal of Academic Research in Business	2019
2.	Language, Literacy, and Learning: Interventions for <i>Orang Asli</i> Children	Nor Aini Ismail & Rafidah Aga Mohd	Southeast Asia Early Childhood Journal	2020
3.	The Struggles of Indigenous Students in Malaysian Classrooms	Abd Jalil et al.	Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction	2023
4.	Language Barrier and its Effects on <i>Orang Asli</i> Students' Academic Performance	Ramesh Naidu et al.	Journal of Education and Social Sciences	2021
5.	The Role of Mother Tongue in Learning Malay Among <i>Orang Asli</i> Pupils	Mohd Salleh Aman et al.	International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling	2020
6.	Understanding Language Barriers Faced by <i>Orang Asli</i> Students in Primary Education	Nurul Huda Ahmad	Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Sciences	2018
7.	Literacy Development Among <i>Orang Asli</i> Children in Rural Schools in Malaysia	Noraini Idris & Zuraidah Abdullah	International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research	2022
8.	The English Language Curriculum in Malaysian Indigenous Primary Classrooms: The Reality and the Ideal	Warid Mihat	3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal	2017
9.	English Language Teaching and Learning Issues in Malaysia: Teachers' and Indigenous Students' Perspectives of the Teaching Methods Used to Teach English Language	Rohaida Ibrahim, Muhamad Sayuti, Ibrahim	ResearchGate	2018
10.	Language Vitality Among the <i>Orang Asli</i> of Malaysia: The Case of the Mah Meri on Telo' Gunjeng (Carey Island, Selangor)	Paolo Coluzzi, Patricia Nora Riget, Wang Xiaomei	International Journal of the Sociology of Language	2017
11.	The Impact of Language of Instruction in Schools on Student Achievement:	Soh Yew Chong, Del Carpio, Ximena Vanessa,	Policy Research Working Paper No. WPS 9517	2021

	Evidence from Malaysia Using the Synthetic Control Method	Wang Liang Choon		
12.	Exploration of Malay Language Acquisition and Learning Experience among <i>Orang Asli</i> Students	Nor Shaid, N. A., Hamid, S. A., & Maros, M.	International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 21(5), 125–138.	2022

4.0 Findings

Based on the list of articles in your document, four key factors contributing to language barriers among the *Orang Asli* community include:

4.1 Limited Exposure to the Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language)

Many *Orang Asli* children grow up speaking their native language at home, with very little exposure to Malay before they start school. When they enter the classroom, they suddenly have to learn everything in *Malay*, a language many of them barely understand. This creates a huge challenge because they're not just learning a new subject but they're trying to learn in a language they've had little chance to practice. Research shows that without early exposure to *Malay*, these children struggle with basic reading and writing, making it harder for them to keep up in school.

The issue goes beyond just learning vocabulary. These children are expected to switch from the language they've always known to one they rarely hear outside of school. Mohd Salleh Aman et al., (2020) (*article no. 5*) explain how difficult this transition is, especially since *Malay* isn't just another subject but the language they need to understand all their lessons. Without hearing *Malay* at home or in their community, they miss out on everyday practice that could help them improve.

Nor Shaid et al., (2022) (*article no. 12*) studied how *Orang Asli* students learn *Malay* and found that progress is slow, not because they lack ability, but because they simply don't get enough exposure to the language. Bhavana Kunkaliar's (2023) research supports this, showing that language development depends heavily on how much children hear and use a language in daily life. Without enough opportunities to speak and listen to *Malay*, these students face an uphill battle in school.

4.2 Lack of Culturally Responsive Teaching Methods

Many teaching methods simply don't work for *Orang Asli* students because they fail to consider these children's language and cultural background (Mohamad Safwat Ashahri et al., 2020). Schools keep using the same standardized approach for everyone, but this one size fits all method often leaves *Orang Asli* students behind. When lessons don't relate to their daily lives, these kids naturally struggle to understand and engage with the material.

Abd Jalil and his team (2023) (*article no. 3*). examined this issue in their study *The Struggles of Indigenous Students in Malaysian Classrooms*. Their research revealed that conventional teaching approaches just don't suit *Orang Asli* students. This mismatch creates feelings of isolation and adds unnecessary language barriers to learning.

The core problem isn't that these children can't learn. The real issue is that our education system isn't adapting to how they learn best. Unless we develop teaching methods that honour their linguistic and cultural identity, *Orang Asli* students will keep facing unnecessary obstacles in their education.

Teachers themselves recognize this disconnect. Rohaida Ibrahim, Muhamad Sayuti, and Ibrahim (2018) (*article no. 9*) found in their research that standard English teaching methods don't meet Indigenous students' needs. Their study, *Teachers' Perspectives on the Disconnect Between Standard English Instruction Methods and Indigenous Students' Needs*, shows how these mismatched approaches cause students to fall behind in English and other subjects.

All this research points to one clear solution which is, we need teaching methods that actually connect with *Orang Asli* students' lives. By creating culturally responsive lessons that respect their background, we can help bridge the learning gap and build a more inclusive education system for all.

4.3 Low Literacy and Language Support at Home

For most *Orang Asli* families, helping kids with schoolwork is almost impossible. Since *Bahasa Melayu* and English usually are not spoken at home, children don't get to practice these languages outside class. This makes learning much tougher. Researchers like Azmira Maulod et al. (2019) (*article no.1*) found this is one of the biggest struggles *Orang Asli* students face. Their study shows when parents can't help with language skills because they don't know the languages well themselves, kids have to figure everything out alone. Kids will eventually fail to complete their learning activities.

The challenges don't stop there. Noraini Idris and Zuraidah Abdullah (2022) (*article no.7*) discovered another major problem in rural *Orang Asli* communities. Many parents can't read or write well, and families often don't have books or learning materials at home. Think about trying to learn when there's nothing to read in your house and no one who can help you practice. That's what many *Orang Asli* children deal with every day, making school much harder for them than for other kids.

This research shows we need solutions that work both in school and at home. If we want these children to succeed, we have to find ways to help parents support their kids' learning and make sure families have access to books and learning tools. When schools and families work together, we can give these students a real chance to do well.

4.4 Policy and Curriculum Misalignment

The school system often doesn't account for the language barriers *Orang Asli* students face, and this directly affects their grades. As Ramesh Naidu et al., (2021) (*article no. 4*) found in their study *Poor Academic Results Due to Language Mismatches Between Home and School*, when the language kids speak at home differs from what's used in class, it creates a major learning obstacle. Students struggle to follow lessons and understand materials when they're constantly translating in their heads.

The problem gets worse with English classes. Warid Minhat's 2017 (*article no. 8*) research *The English Language Curriculum in Malaysian Indigenous Primary Classrooms* shows how the current curriculum expects students to already know both *Malay* and English well. But many *Orang Asli* students are still learning these languages, so they fall behind in subjects that depend on them. It's like being asked to solve math problems before you've learned numbers.

What these studies tell us is clear: we need school policies that actually work for *Orang Asli* students. If we create flexible teaching approaches that meet kids where they are language-wise, we can help them succeed instead of setting them up to fail. The solution isn't making school easier, it's making it make sense for these students' real needs

5.0 Suggestions

Addressing the language barriers faced by *Orang Asli* students requires a comprehensive and holistic approach, considering the historical, cultural, and systemic factors that contribute to their challenges. This approach should include the following key strategies :

5.1 Curriculum Reform

A more applicable option is to integrate *Orang Asli* language and cultural content in the national curriculum so that the *Orang Asli* students can learn something meaningful and useful to them and that which is relevant. When the curriculum includes the local customs, traditions, and worldviews, i.e. traditional story-telling, knowledge of the land, and cultural symbols, students will be able to relate to what they are learning in a more positive way. Education may be made more interesting in cases where it relies on the existing customs such as community maps and oral history that are well ingrained within the cultural background. Not only can such an approach facilitate scholarly growth but it can also provide assistance to help them retain their identity and culture (Intan Farahana Kamsin & Fariza Khalid, 2023). Such curriculum reform that would make the approach culturally inclusive is capable of filling the gap between the school and home setting and make sure that students are not isolated on account of language differences.

5.2 Teacher Training

The importance of professional development in the professional field of teachers cannot be underestimated, especially regarding the proper expertise in the culturally responsible teaching techniques and proficiency in the native tongue. A study conducted by Shah and Adnan (2020) states that most teachers in *Orang Asli* communities lack proper education to appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity among their students thus preventing engagement and low academic performance. Allowing teachers to have the resources to integrate traditional knowledge system, oral histories, and place-based learning practice within their pedagogy will help create a more accommodating environment. When students find their culture in their lessons, they become more motivated and academic performance becomes better.

5.3 Community Involvement

Involvement of the *Orang Asli* communities in the educational process will guarantee consideration of their views, customs, and needs in the educational system. This participatory model not only ensures ownership and building trust among the people that they reach, but it also decolonizes the classroom. In New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, community based education models have demonstrated that such education can bring about an improvement in attendance rates, performance and retention than externally imposed ones. By integrating the *Orang Asli* people in the decision-making process, Malaysia will be able to develop the education system that would take into consideration their culture, its knowledge, and desires.

6.0 Conclusion

The language is one of the major problems of educational achievement of *Orang Asli* students. Addressing these obstacles involves the combined efforts of educators, policymakers, and communities in constructing an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Community-level research would help Malaysia to overcome linguistic disparities in providing an equal education to all *Orang Asli* students. This includes offering bilingual or native-language-based education in early childhood for enhanced understanding and engagement, education of teachers in culturally competent pedagogy and Indigenous language such that they are able to pass on the language to their students, and treating *Orang Asli* communities as partners in shaping education policy. By adopting these measures, Malaysia can move towards increasing access and cultural relevancy in the education system where student diversity is respected and educational equity is embraced.

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