Newcastle University e-prints

Date deposited: 11th January 2011

Version of file: Author final

Peer Review Status: Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:
Sercombe PG. Language and education: The experience of the Penan in Brunei. International Journal of Educational Development 2010, 30(6), 625-635.

Further information on publisher website:
http://www.elsevier.com

Publisher’s copyright statement:
The definitive version of this article, published by Elsevier, 2010, is available at:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2010.05.001
Always use the definitive version when citing.

Use Policy:
The full-text may be used and/or reproduced and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not for profit purposes provided that:

• A full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
• A link is made to the metadata record in Newcastle E-prints
• The full text is not changed in any way.

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Robinson Library, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne. NE1 7RU. Tel. 0191 222 6000
INTRODUCTION
Rurally situated minority groups in Southeast Asia, especially those with nomadic backgrounds, such as the Penan in Borneo, have received relatively little scholarly attention with regard to language knowledge and use, language education and levels of achievement in formal learning contexts. When individuals from these small, as well as socially, politically and generally economically vulnerable groups enter formal education, they are almost inevitably immersed in school settings where the medium (or media) of instruction are either second or foreign languages, and where they receive little or no second or foreign language support for their immersion or, rather, submersion experience. These minorities, in this case the Penan of Brunei, frequently attain (unnecessarily) poor academic results for reasons that are posited and discussed in subsequent pages. This article depicts the environment of Penan in Sukang, in the southern part of Brunei, and describes ways in which the Penan are affected by aspects of the context they inhabit, including national policies, in terms of language and social categorisation. The paper begins with an outline of the locality, physical and social, and goes on to describe the language ecology of this part of Brunei. It then considers more closely the local school and its role, as a conduit for the implementation of national policy, and ways in which Penan children interact with this formal environment.

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT
Geography
The Penan comprise a discrete community of around fifty-five people, permanently settled only since 1962. Prior to this time, they were hunter-gatherers in the rainforest of southern Brunei and neighbouring Sarawak, in East Malaysia (Sercombe 2002). The 2,700 square kilometre Belait River basin, where the Penan live, is composed mostly of primary rainforest, and is sparsely populated with an average of less than ten people per square kilometer; and this is traversed by Brunei’s longest waterway, the Belait River. Distinct from coastal Brunei in a number of ways, Sukang is

- the largest sub-district in Brunei in terms of area
- the least populated district, with the lowest population density of any part of the country
- realistically accessible only by river (or helicopter)
- without ethnic Malays (the nation’s demographic and political majority), Chinese traders, or expatriate inhabitants (who are otherwise a significant presence in coastal parts of Brunei)
- economically focused on subsistence agriculture, and
- an area in which the national code, Brunei Malay, is infrequently used and, hence, where the local language ecology is marked in relation to that of coastal Brunei

It is important to bear in mind the physical and social setting in which the Penan and neighbouring communities live and interact for, as Gal (1979:16) suggests, “To understand the social aspects of synchronic linguistic heterogeneity, it is necessary to describe the social processes that maintain it ... and the constraints placed on it by
Sukang Village
Sukang village is set in a large area of primary as well as old growth secondary rainforest. It is presently only accessible by a two-hour private boat journey from the nearest downriver small settlement, from where there is road access Kuala Belait, the district’s main to the coastal town. Of some importance is the relatively remote location of Sukang in contrast to coastal Brunei, including: the pre-industrial rural situation; the relative inaccessibility from main intercity roads and highways, hospitals, cinemas, air-conditioned supermarkets, government offices and the modern life of metropolitan Brunei. In addition, little coastal traffic reaches Sukang, and this contributes to a sense of being removed from the dominating and homogenising effects of national culture (cf. Steward 1972: 50; Rousseau 1990; and Verdery 1994). Due to this relative isolation, inhabitants of Sukang seem to show fewer signs of being absorbed into the Malay-dominated majority of Brunei’s population (cf. Brown 1970: 4). However, the government’s Islamic Propogation Centre (Pusat Dakwah) actively proselytises in Sukang. It has gained a number of converts, including twelve Penan in Sukang (who are offered financial incentives to embrace Islam), along with converts from neighbouring local groups. Even so, there remains little sign that Penan have undergone deep cultural
shifts in their daily behaviour or practices.4

Sukang Village comprises an eight-door single-storey Penan longhouse and a small four-door Dusun longhouse. There is a telephone (which does not always function) in the Dusun residence and, more recently, a telephone in the Penan longhouse, but this is set only to receive incoming calls, when it actually functions. There is also a village school located on the right side of the Belait River at the southernmost edge of the village. It constitutes an important social gathering place not only for school staff, and occasional visitors to the school, but also as a location for village meetings. The village also has a small medical clinic, a sub-district police post, a government resthouse, a small Muslim chapel (surau) and four small government-provided houses provided as teachers’ quarters.

The population of the sub-district has been declining steadily over the years, with a steady shift to the coast. Currently, inhabitants of Sukang make their livelihood locally, i.e. no one commutes to work beyond the sub-district. The main means of employment in Sukang is the subsistence cultivation of hill rice; there is no commercial agriculture and no livestock are reared. In this respect, Sukang remains economically traditional compared to coastal areas of Brunei, where subsistence farming no longer takes place, but where there is commercial horticulture and animal husbandry. A few Sukang residents have salaried jobs as teachers, or wage-work as cooks or grass-cutters in the village; and most residents have relatives on the coast in some kind of wage or salary employment, although the Penan are exceptions in this. The ‘unusual’ residents, in the sense of being temporary inhabitants yet coming into regularly daily contact with those from Sukang, are the teacher-outsiders from coastal areas who, being Malay, inevitably form a distinct minority in the context of Sukang.

Table 1: Population of Sukang Sub-district (total 430)5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Numbers (%)</th>
<th>Official Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dusun</td>
<td>37 (9%)</td>
<td>indigenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iban</td>
<td>338 (79%)</td>
<td>non-indigenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penan</td>
<td>55 (12%)</td>
<td>non-indigenous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Brunei Government 1991, the most recent publicly available records)

There are three ethnolinguistic groups local to Sukang: the Dusun are the smallest group (at only thirty-seven) in Sukang Village; however, the ethnonym Dusun has no official status in Brunei, for the Dusun are officially considered *puak jati* (i.e. indigenous group), and are thus seen to be part of the pan-Malay community (see Sercombe in this volume). As the only officially indigenous group (in contrast to the Iban and Penan), the sub-district headman (*penghulu*) is drawn from among the Dusun to oversee the communities in the sub-district, on the national government’s behalf.

There are also Iban who constitute the largest, and most widely distributed of the three ethnolinguistic groups in the sub-district, although they are officially considered ‘other-indigenous’. They are relatively recent arrivals in Brunei. Many came in a number of small waves during the early twentieth century in response to the increasing labour needs of Brunei’s expanding oil industry and, subsequently, in the 1940s, when they fled the
Japanese occupation of neighbouring Sarawak. The Iban generally adhere more to their traditions than other minority groups in Brunei. They also have a tendency to absorb other non-Muslim Austronesians with whom they come into contact, and there is evidence of this in this sub-district and other parts of rural Brunei (Sercombe 1999). Leake (1990) suggests that ‘The Ibans are by far Brunei’s most vigorous native group, with numbers rising rather than declining.’ Iban also inhabit the districts of neighbouring Sarawak that border Brunei and frequently travel back and forth during festival periods; and this helps to foster and maintain Iban traditions (Sercombe 1999). They are a significant cultural presence in Sukang and elsewhere, in outlying parts of Brunei.

The Penan, like the Iban, are considered ‘other-indigenous’, following the Brunei Nationality Act of 1961. In Sukang, as elsewhere, the Penan are ascribed low social status, like many nomads and ex-nomads (cf. Barth 1969: 31). There is some evidence of deculturation, or cultural loss among the Penan; and in Sarawak they seem to be undergoing similar kinds of transformation (Sercombe 1996).

LANGUAGE USE IN SUKANG

Patterns of language knowledge and use in Sukang are different from those in Brunei’s coastal areas. Taking the sub-district as an areal speech community, there are three distinct smaller relatively discrete ‘speech communities’, a situation in which each of the local, or Sukang, languages has intra-ethnic functions (Sercombe 2003); and Martin and Sercombe (1996: 307) observe that ‘Sukang is one of the few areas in Brunei where a form of Brunei Malay does not fulfil the role of lingua franca’, except among the teachers temporarily stationed there, but who originate from coastal parts of the country.

The local lingua franca is Iban, for all informal interethnic communication as well as some aspects of formal interaction (Nothofer 1991; and Martin and Sercombe 1996). Sukang thus comprises a self-contained areal speech community with a set of language norms distinct from the rest of the nation (cf. Gumperz 1968: 381). Iban’s functions tend to reduce ‘intergroup differences’ (cf. Blanc 1994: 356), given the pattern of linguistic accommodation between groups. It is a somewhat neutral language in Sukang (if a language can ever be ‘neutral’) in that, within Brunei, the Iban hold no political power, nationally, have limited official status and are not appointed to positions of responsibility in Brunei’s civil service. In addition, Iban (and, hence, their language) have relatively low social status in coastal areas of Brunei, as non-Muslims who mainly (but not exclusively) work in manual labouring spheres. All Dusun and Penan (in Sukang) speak Iban fluently. Figure (2), below, illustrates the patterns of language use in Sukang in which one can see that Iban is the most commonly used language.

Dusun is the indigenous language of Sukang district with the highest official status, since the Dusun are classified as Malay. Dusun is also perceived as a dialect of Malay (in official terms), although the two languages are mutually incomprehensible. Dusun has, however, the smallest number of speakers in the sub-district. Few Iban or Penan have more than the scantiest knowledge of the Dusun language.
Penan is a language of Central Borneo and part of the sub-group of Kenyah languages (Sercombe 2006). Knowledge and use of Penan is exclusive to the Penan community, for intra-ethnic communication, and is virtually unknown to anyone else in Brunei. Penan is Sukang’s lowest status language, yet it has the highest number of first language speakers in Sukang Village.

There are also two non-local languages within Sukang - English and standard Malay - and these have mainly (prescribed) institutional functions. As mentioned, the national lingua franca, Brunei Malay (as distinct from standard Malay; see Sercombe, in this volume for further details) is largely restricted to use among teachers, of Malay ethnic background, originating from outside Sukang.

Consequently, five separate languages occur within the sub-district: three ‘Sukang’ languages, Iban, Dusun and Penan; and two ‘non-Sukang’ languages, English and Malay. English and Malay are superimposed supraregional and national languages, respectively. Malay is used only to a limited extent as a functional code in Sukang outside the village primary school. Of the two superimposed languages, Malay and English, it is Malay that has a small role within Sukang Village and the sub-district as a whole. Malay is a medium of instruction in the village primary school, as in all Brunei government schools, for every subject (except English) in the first three years of education and for a few subjects in the latter three years of primary school (see Sercombe in this volume). It is also used as a means of disseminating official or government information as well as for prosyletisation. Malay is likewise utilised for communication with ‘outsiders’, i.e. Bruneians from coastal areas and when residents from Sukang travel downriver. School teachers originating from outside Sukang are most often first language speakers of Brunei Malay. Malay, in Sukang, tends mostly to fulfil, what Mühlhäusler
(1996: 56) calls, an ‘informative role’, but a minor one. However, among those Dusun who have embraced Islam, some have begun to use Malay, within the community and the family, as a first language, to demonstrate affiliation with Malayness and modernity, they say, although Penan and Iban converts to Islam are not currently following this trend.

Finally, in Sukang, there is English which is restricted almost exclusively to the primary school curriculum and some local television programmes (although there are no functioning television sets in the Penan longhouse). Officially, English is the main medium of instruction in the upper three years of primary school, but few children in Sukang can produce anything other than simple clauses or brief formulaic phrases in spoken English, and none can produce a coherent piece of extended written discourse in the language. Yet success in English is essential for academic and, ultimately, socio-economic advancement for Bruneians.

English has no role as a means of interaction in Sukang Sub-district. Like Malay, it also fulfils an informative role, but a more restricted and artificial one (than Malay), given its lack of functions beyond its narrow academic role in the school curriculum. There is also a lack of exposure to English for local inhabitants, compared to the extent of its use on the coast, through the various media, and the relatively larger presence of first and second language speakers of English, both local (generally, the political elite) and expatriate.

Sukang primary school is a conduit for the curriculum that the Brunei ministry of education wishes imparted to local school children, including a form of Malay as the dominant national code and the importance of English as the de facto foreign language. As suggested, Sukang seems to reflect a UNESCO (2005: 1) observation that: ‘The linguistic boundaries between rich and poor are usually quite clear. The elite speak the language of education, governance and other official domains, while marginalized groups speak languages or dialects that are not valued or even recognized outside their communities.’

Formal education tends to reproduce power relations that already exist in society and, in the case of Sukang, there is little attempt to engage parents in their children’s schooling, although it has been emphasised (e.g. Wong Fillmore 1991) how important it is that...
educational systems work with rather than without (or even against) homes and communities of minority language groups.

In a sense, Sukang village school is similar to any other in Brunei in terms of its official remit but, as with the village in general, it is marked in terms of its remote location, the composition of its population and its language ecology, among other factors which can and do affect the academic progress of some local school children. For example, parent-teacher meetings, either formal or informal, do not take place in Sukang, while they do in coastal schools. As Saville-Troike (1996: 374) suggests: ‘To understand classroom interaction processes and content, we must continually bear in mind that teachers are operating within a culturally defined system of education and knowledge’; and this system is dominated by the national ideology Melayu Islam Beraja (Malay, Islam and Monarchy, generally referred to as MIB) the nation’s predominantly promulgated dogma: one nation (in the form of one ethnic group), one religion and one ruler, a notion that is continually articulated in the government’s communication with its subjects, as a means of legitimizing the status quo, that has been integrated into the national school curriculum and which has diminished linguistic diversity across the country (Saxena 2007).

Within the village, the primary school constitutes a significant institutional setting as it brings together members of the three ethnolinguistic groups inhabiting the sub-district (Dusun, Iban and Penan) on a daily basis. The steadily increasing proportion of Penan children (over the years) at the local school can be accounted for by the general lack of mobility of Penan adults, who are financially very poor in contrast with those from the other groups whose numbers at the local school are declining (Sercombe 2007). This is either because Dusun and Iban parents are gradually relocating downriver to urban or suburban areas, or they are sending their children to live with relatives on the coast where there is easier and greater access to education, health and other modern facilities. Penan children do not have the option of attending other primary schools since they would have nowhere to reside, with only three Penan living on the coast and in relatively poor circumstances. While Penan comprise the majority of school pupils, in Sukang (comprising 20 out of a total of 43 children), they are not represented among the school staff at any level. There is no official adult Penan presence around the school, other than the occasional appearance of the Penan headman, who is a grass-cutter, the only Penan of any officially recognised status in Brunei, as he receives an annual stipend for his community leadership role.

In some respects, Sukang primary school is disadvantaged compared to schools in coastal areas. It has fewer resources (or less easy access to these): electricity is available only part of the day; half the teachers are from elsewhere in Brunei and are not generally interested in working at the school; lack of access to electronic media, such as television and the internet, which are otherwise taken for granted on the coast; no daily print media; and a very small school library to which children have limited and closely controlled access. However, people who live by subsistence in the interior are dependent on education as a means of upward social mobility, the only way they are likely to improve their social and economic lot, if they have aspirations beyond a subsistence lifestyle, and manual work (cf. Nagata 1979: 240). As UNESCO (2005: 1) suggests: ‘Basic education
is seen as the best means for improving conditions for poor and rural populations, disadvantaged social groups, and females, in general.’

Sukang primary school has eight teachers of whom four are from coastal areas. As mentioned, those not from Sukang are first language speakers of Malay. They receive no orientation regarding the school or environment to which they have been posted and cannot speak any of the locally used languages. In 2002, their first visit to a neighbouring Iban village, after a year of working in Sukang, was with me; and it was their first experience of entering a longhouse. The Iban headman, on meeting these teachers, asked if they could speak Malay, as none of them offered him a greeting or any other sign of acknowledgement. The headman assumed that not only did they not know how to speak Iban (which is correct), but that they also knew no Malay. Subsequently, these visitors responded to questions about themselves but, otherwise, initiated no conversation with members of the longhouse community during our one-hour visit.

While there have been teachers, over the years in Sukang, who have integrated, especially those who have originated from the locality or have grown up in a rural part of Brunei, the majority of teachers posted to the village have a negative impression of life in Sukang Village. Non-local teachers who have gained most from their time at the local school are those who have managed to relate to the rural environment and its inhabitants, and who have adapted to local life (cf. Moll 1992). Most outside teachers, however, reveal a sense of culture shock at being posted upriver by the Ministry of Education; and the prevailing sentiments among these teachers not infrequently result in extended periods of absence from the village school during term time, further depriving students of academic encouragement and support.

Observation of what takes place in classes, especially those of non-local teachers, suggests there are common expectations that seem to reflect the myth of a ‘universal child’ (Christie and Harris 1985: 81). Little credence is given to, for example, local children’s world views and cultural practices (Henze 1992: 48). Furthermore, teachers’ stereotyping of Penan as a non-conformist outgroup seems to affect these childrens’ performances (cf. Topping 1992) and results in the early exit of some from school.

Language Use in Sukang Primary School
At the informal level, the local school is a microcosm of language use in the sub-district. General patterns of language use, whereby there is regular alternating use of languages among local teachers and pupils use can be observed in the village primary school, depending who is present as well as who is talking to whom. The situation in Sukang is radically dissimilar to that of many schools in urban areas where Bruneian students, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, tend to use a form of Malay as the medium of common interaction or lingua franca.

In general, there is much teacher talk and little student participation, especially in the transition year (four), meant to be predominantly English medium, and years five and six, as compared to the first three years of Malay medium education. In these years, teachers appear to lecture and engage students largely by asking closed, factual questions as the
major part of spoken interaction, with initiation, short responses from pupils (mostly one word) and little or no follow-up. There appears heavy reliance on teacher control to maintain passive conformity, convergent thinking and passive intake, as opposed to encouraging more independent and participatory styles of learning (cf. Cummins 1994). Teachers appear to operate on the basis that learning is primarily a case of transmission from teacher to child, even though they have been exposed to ideas, in their teacher training, that children can and do construct knowledge through their own thought processes and interactions with objects, ideas and the world around them.

In Brunei government primary schools, no official allowance is made for children who come from non-Malay-speaking backgrounds and children from linguistic minorities need to become proficient in Malay (as well as English), when they attend local government education, if they are to succeed academically. As Kotzé (1994: 1153) suggests: ‘members of an ethnic minority with a different mother tongue have to acquire a sufficient command of the chosen medium to be able to benefit from the education system.’ However, the use of Malay and English in classrooms means pupils’ experience is similar to that suggested by Nunan and Lam (1998: 122): ‘The NDL (non-dominant language) is ignored completely and NDL speakers are expected to sink or swim in classes for all subjects that use the DL exclusively.’ However, a fast conversion to the majority language can be harmful. It denies the child’s skills in the home language and even denies the identity and self-respect of the child her or himself. As UNESCO (2005: 2) observes: ‘only some of those who attend school will be able to learn the new language well enough to understand instruction and pass to higher levels.’

Patterns of language use in Sukang Primary School can be configured as follows:

(i) Non-Sukang teachers speak to other non-Sukang teachers in Brunei Malay since this is their first language and the default national code.

(ii) Non-Sukang teachers speak standard Malay to local (Sukang) teachers, including the headmaster, non-teaching staff and villagers, since that is both commonly understood, the formally designated code of the school and some local staff are not familiar with the national variety, Brunei Malay. Some teachers from Sukang have knowledge of Brunei Malay but none of the non-local teachers can speak Dusun, Iban or Penan.

(iii) Non-Sukang teachers use standard Malay with pupils since that is the official language medium. This is in addition to English which is used to a limited extent in English-medium classes. They have either trained in a predominantly monolingual (Malay) or bilingual (English dominant, with some Malay) medium paradigm but, either way, their social and cultural experience has been in Brunei Malay-dominated contexts. They are effectively monolingual in the context of Sukang for social interaction. While none of them knows any of the languages used in Sukang district, only two local inhabitants are functionally proficient in English; and Malay is a minority language in Sukang. While Martin (1996: 134) suggests that code-switching in Brunei classrooms is a way, for both teachers and pupils, to cope ‘with the linguistic pressures of the classroom’, in Sukang the ability to switch codes is not available to outside teachers, other than
between Malay and English for two teachers, since they have no knowledge of the local lingua franca, Iban, or the other (first) languages of pupils in Sukang.

(iv) Local teachers use standard Malay with the school headmaster in formal circumstances, or when non-local teachers are present; otherwise, they use the district lingua franca, Iban.

(v) Non-teaching staff (who comprise the Iban school gardener and two female Dusun cooks) speak Iban to local teaching staff. The Iban gardener uses Iban in the school kitchen at break and lunch times, when all the teachers are present, regardless of whom he is addressing.

(vi) Local teachers speak to pupils in standard Malay or English (albeit rarely). They also use Iban if interacting informally. In class, they use mostly standard Malay, although small amounts of English are used in English-medium classes.

(vii) Pupils address teachers in either English, standard Malay or Iban, depending on the teacher being addressed, the degree of formality of the interaction and the subject. For example, requests for permission to leave the class, or go to the toilet, are made in English in all classes, except kindergarten and primary one where pupils may inadvertently use their first languages. Otherwise, formal interaction tends to be in standard Malay, even in English classes, except for when children are required to repeat an utterance or chorally drill a structure in English.

(viii) Pupils address pupils of the same ethnic background in their own language most of the time, otherwise Iban is the inter-ethnic lingua franca, as it is in the sub-district as a whole. Spontaneous discourse among pupils, in Malay or English-medium lessons, whether in Dusun, Iban or Penan is accepted by local teachers as a fact of life, but it can upset outside teachers because they are excluded from comprehending discourse (that is not in Malay or English).

**THE LANGUAGE EDUCATION SITUATION OF PENAN CHILDREN IN SUKANG**

In this section, some of the general education and language education issues affecting Penan school children are discussed. Brunei’s rural population of non-Malay speakers is small (in relation to the coastally located population of ethnic Malays), and one can reasonably argue that their numbers make it impractical to try and accommodate them in terms of first language instruction to the point of functional literacy. A government or ministry of education might ‘reasonably’ expect that minority groups will assimilate to the national language variety and culture which to some extent the Dusun are doing (see Kershaw 1994, for further details); while Iban have been able to make the most of formal education without undergoing language or culture attrition (Sercombe 1999), even among those who have converted to Islam.

Penan constitute the highest percentage of children attending Sukang village school. The consistently poor results obtained by these children indicate that the limited educational
resources available in the village school are not achieving desired returns (cf. Romaine 1995: 284), in although a Penan’s only realistic means of securing socio-economic advancement is through educational attainment, as suggested earlier. Since 1962, only one Penan has progressed to secondary level education, a sad reflection of this community’s social and economic advancement. However, perhaps this is not too surprising in the light of Cummins’ (cited in Eggington 1992: 85) suggestion that ‘groups that tend to experience the most pronounced educational failure are those that have historically experienced a pattern of subjugation to the dominant group, over generations ... the relationship between the majority and minority group is one which has historically led to an ambivalent and insecure identity among native minorities.’

Both Malay and English are decontextualised in Sukang and literacy presented through these languages is isolated from daily experience, becoming the object rather than the vehicle for analysis. One can argue that it is beneficial for pupils to learn in standard Malay in Sukang since it is useful to those who move outside the sub-district, to coastal areas, for some parts of their secondary education and where forms of Malay are more widely used as well as for their social integration among Brunei’s national majority. However, Penan children, in particular, fail to gain adequate Malay language skills to progress academically due, partly at least, to a paucity of exposure to standard Malay, at home, in school, and through television, radio or print media, to which there is limited access other than via radio.

Neither Malay nor English surrounds children in Sukang in their daily lives, unless they travel to coastal areas. The Penan, who have limited access to varieties of Malay, other than through the structured environment of the village primary school, and their lack of educational and material success is but one aspect of their non-integration into national culture (see Sercombe 2006 for further details). Compared to Dusun and Iban (who have a much longer history of settlement, higher social status, comprise much larger groups in Brunei, are more attuned to the demands of the modern world, are wealthier and regularly travel beyond Sukang Sub-district), Penan have little opportunity to practise or use Malay outside the classroom in Sukang, speaking the language only with teachers in a formal context and then only in a very limited way. The target language, whether English or Malay, is not a local lingua franca with the potential resulting gain in motivation to use either of these languages and a broadening of functions for each (cf. Johnson 1996: 108-9; and Martin 1996: 133). However, Penan’s lack of success at school is not unique to Brunei, as similar situations hold among Penan in Malaysian Sarawak (Sercombe 2009), again, where Penan are frequently located in isolated rural areas and similar kinds of disadvantages.

Compared to the Dusun and Iban with their substantial tradition of settlement, swidden agriculture and long experience of exposure to formal education, there appears a schism between the traditionally oral, fluid culture of the Penan and the school context in which literacy can be seen as ‘more a group social issue than an individual pedagogical one’ (Eggington 1992: 81-82). Failure among the Penan at school is partially due to the gulf between the culture, values and beliefs of the school compared to those of the Penan, that persist in the Penan’s home environment (Sercombe 2006). Among the Penan
community, relationships are symbiotic and defined by consanguine and affinal links, such that school-age children may be required to help with planting and harvesting rice, regardless of the school’s schedule and attendance requirements. Failure among the Penan can also be attributed to their socioeconomic position: they have a small demographic presence and low status, this sometimes being openly articulated, by teachers at the school.\textsuperscript{12}

Penan parents do not stress individual (academic) achievement among children in academic areas, sports, or other school-related activities, and their children are not under pressure to become bilingual in Malay (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas 1981), a position which is at odds with other ethnic groups in Brunei (cf. Martin 2008). The values and activities of school tend not to be absorbed into the home and thus reinforced (cf. Heath 1983). Some Penan parents have said (to me) that their children’s mere presence in school should endow them with relevant skills; and while they are aware of their children’s relative lack of academic success they do not appear unduly concerned; furthermore, they feel they can do little about this state of affairs.

The hierarchical nature of school with its regimes of authority is very much at odds with the social autonomy of Penan society. Penan do not generally make overt criticisms of each other (other than in gentle jest) and can be cowed when this is done in earnest, which happens not infrequently at school when they are chastised by teachers for not responding to questions. The kinds of assessment that Penan undergo, in terms of formal testing and examination in school, are unlikely to take account of the skills Penan possess. The majority of Bruneians (unless they live in rural areas and live by subsistence) know little about the flora and fauna of their country, to the same degree as do Penan, although this knowledge seems to be in decline (Voeks and Sercombe 2000). Some Bruneians do not even know of the existence of the Penan in Brunei. If they are aware of this ethnic group, it is generally only by name and nothing is known of their culture or language (as I found when working at the University of Brunei Darussalam and surveyed students regarding their awareness of Brunei ethnic groups).

Traditionally, Penan learn by observation and imitation rather than through verbal instruction. The function of talk, for Penan, appears primarily concerned with establishing and maintaining social relations rather than for transactional purposes. Penan children learn by doing, more by repetition rather than verbal analysis. Involvement in school lessons also depends on pupils having the requisite social skills as well as access to academic knowledge. Penan may lack these, in terms of what their teachers expect, especially in classes where they are in a minority and do not feel a part of the classroom community. Teachers’ use of abstract language to talk about objects, events and processes are not generally related to the day-to-day practices of everyday life. Penan children are often reserved (especially in the presence of children from other ethnic groups) and are frequently unwilling to take centre stage, for this continues to be interpreted as boastful behaviour and can be socially disapproved of in Penan society. They are also unlikely to guess answers, or advertise individual ability; they are cautious in speech and action compared to those from other groups. They prefer not to volunteer answers in class and will not claim they can undertake a task unless they can do it with full competence and confidence such that, despite encouragement, Penan children are
often reluctant to demonstrate a skill. Teachers generally cannot (or are unwilling) to understand why Penan pupils are so reluctant to take part in lessons, to foreground themselves by, for example, answering a direct question, if they are not fully certain of an answer, when to do so would be considered marked behavior for a Penan. Teachers have little understanding of the norms of Penan language behaviour. Verbally articulating greetings is alien as is publicly expressing gratitude to others given Penan, by default, are always doing ‘favours’ for each other, as they can be seen as part of community membership rights and obligations (Sercombe 2007), such that thanks would not expected. No account in school is taken of particular problems of Penan children regarding their economic poverty, such that Penan are frequently castigated for arriving in school bare-footed (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas 1988). Another example is that Penan children are not generally expected to ask their parents for permission to undertake activities, in the same way that they are obliged to at school. Within the context of their own community, Penan children are mostly with their parents or relatives constantly, or are seen as relatively autonomous beings, able to make their own decisions, so unlikely is an individual to behave in a socially deviant manner.

In connection with these issues, several concerns arise in recent discussions of literacy, which are relevant to the situation of the Penan, and the dichotomy between print-literate and predominantly oral cultures (Dubin 1992: viii-ix), given Penan in Brunei have no access to printed matter in their own language, of which the following can be considered especially important dimensions: rationality versus instinct and empathy; logical analytical conceptualisation and linear thinking (taught in most schools, where literacy is nearly always oriented towards nationally prevailing social and cultural positions), versus holistic conceptualisation; individualisation (with its concomitants of privacy and isolation) versus communality (and cooperation and the id as part of a larger collective identity); images of success or failure (with literacy experiences that begin at school) versus the idea that each individual has an integral part to play in a community (Topping 1992). Ong (1967: 30) suggests that

> In an oral culture learning takes place in an atmosphere of celebration or play ... Only with the invention of writing and the isolation of the individual from the tribe will verbal learning and understanding itself become “work” as distinct from play, and the pleasure principle be downgraded.

The features included in figure 2 are pertinent to the educational experiences of Penan children. Perhaps, in literacy, most consequentially language can be, and often is, isolated such that print text has an independence of meaning (unlike spoken language), divorcing it from the experiences of children from backgrounds where print-literacy has not developed or been fostered, making text the object rather than the vehicle for analysis whereby literacy is itself a function, rather than a conduit of learning.
Figure 2: Features of Literate and Non-literate Societies (adapted from Topping 1992: 29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LITERATE SOCIETIES</th>
<th>NON-LITERATE SOCIETIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy: reading, spelling, writing skills are rewarded</td>
<td>Oracy: elegance of speech, imagination and memory rewarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature: stories through print, great literature only read at school</td>
<td>Oralature: stories are told by word of mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information storage: data books, files, archives libraries, memory can be suspect</td>
<td>Memory storage: select individuals are repositories of information memory is honoured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality: logic, reason are supreme values developed wisdom defined through intellect as defined through calculated measurement</td>
<td>Spiritualism: instinct, empathy knowledge and ability to explain are indicators of wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical analytical conceptualisation: linear thinking taught in schools and held as the ideal model</td>
<td>Holistic conceptualisation: less concern with analysis of individual parts, but how they work together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success-failure image begins with literacy experience in school</td>
<td>Each individual has a part to play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Penan children in the primary school also use their first language as an exclusive code, sometimes during class time, and I observed Penan children in the first year of primary school quietly attempting Malay language exercises aloud to themselves in Penan before writing their answers in standard Malay. There is use of Penan with other Penan children (during lower primary lessons) and the ease and facility with which Penan children move seamlessly between languages appears to develop early on, albeit orally rather than in writing. Among members of the kindergarten group in which the medium of interaction between two Dusun, one Iban and two Penan children is Iban. All the kindergarten children unashamedly used Iban with everyone else in the school (pupils and staff), despite frequently being told to speak Malay only. This class cannot be assigned a teacher who comes from the coast, since none of these can understand the children’s speech.

In relation to this, it is worth discussing media of education and the extent to which Sukang primary school children appear to lose out from such early immersion (or submersion, cf. Appel and Muysken 1990) in Malay medium. Gupta (1997) argues in favour of non-mother tongue medium education, in Singapore, on the basis that it gives access to a language or languages that can lead to social and economic benefits. However, for the most disadvantaged in society (among whom one can include the Penan in Sukang), there appear to be few advantages. Their own language and culture are stigmatized, while there is a lack of sufficient access to Malay (let alone English), such that the majority of Penan have gained little from an education based on languages that are absent from their lives outside the classroom.  

As UNESCO (1953: 11) suggests

> It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in
his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.

More recently, UNESCO (2005: 2) suggests that ‘The younger and more disadvantaged people are, the more likely it is that the home language will provide the most viable means of access to education and to a more productive future’ (also see Larson 1981; and Schooling 1990). In addition, Cummins’ (1986: 20) interdependence hypothesis proposes that: ‘To the extent that instruction through a minority language is effective in developing academic proficiency in the minority language, transfer of this proficiency to the majority language will occur given adequate exposure and motivation to learn the majority language.’ Yet, the myth remains that in multilingual contexts it is too costly to provide resources and prepare teachers in several languages (Tucker 1998: 9), including pupils’ first languages.

Primary four is a significant year for all pupils in Brunei government schools, since it is the year in which Geography, Maths and Science are supposedly introduced and taught through English for the first time. In primary four, in Sukang, there are seven pupils: a Malay (the son of the village policeman), two Dusun, an Iban, as well as three Penan, who speak in whispers to each other in Penan while they sit at the back of the class, looking removed from the hub of activities, having few dealings with the other children in the classroom (cf. Bain and Yu 2000: 1405). However, the situation need not be like this, as Larson et al. (1980) describe successes in bilingual education, both in Aguaruna pupils’ first language and Spanish, in a relatively remote part of the Peruvian rainforest. This appears to have been achieved largely, they claim, as a result of involving local residents in decision-making, and actively encouraging them to contribute actively towards the establishment and maintenance of village schools which are attended by Aguaruna Indian children. However, Penan do not, in this way, so far have the opportunity to contribute actively to the school, only to partake as recipients.

In upper primary classes (particularly years five and six) Penan children say they feel ‘shy’ or ‘ashamed’ (malu) to speak Penan at school and prefer to use only Iban with peers and Malay with teachers (cf. Sercombe 1999). This correlates with the observation that there is a far greater tendency among Penan to use their own language, openly, only in the lower primary classes, while at upper primary levels, there appears greater self-consciousness, and thus reluctance, regarding the use of Penan with their community peers in the school context. There also appears to develop a greater awareness of differences among older children, which is reflected in the reduced inter-ethnic contact between pupils, especially between Penan and children from other groups in years four, five and six.

**GENERAL CONCLUSIONS**

In an attempt to describe the experiences of Penan in Sukang and understand causes of their low rates of academic attainment, this study considers aspects of their physical and social circumstances. These are viewed against the background of the national context.
The challenges faced by Penan at school appear to be a reflection of their generally deprived social situation. It seems that many of the challenges faced by the bilingual education system (cf. Martin 2008) in Brunei are magnified in the Sukang context; and, these include:

- an isolated rural location removed from access to the languages used as media of education in schools
- the media of education (Malay and English) have limited functions outside the immediate school environment in Sukang Village. (Regarding media of education, there may be sound reasons for introducing Penan children ‘to educational programmes in their first language’ (Tucker 1998: 10), as well as exposing them to school target languages (English and Malay), as naturally as possible and in greater quantities, than at present.
- a lack of resources for fostering academic development
- teachers who resent their postings
- poverty (among the Penan)
- an insufficient sense of the value among Penan pupils’ parents of the value of formal education, in that they do not expect educational success, based on past experiences, nor do they foster individual academic ambition, in the same way as do parents of children from other ethno-linguistic groups
- a contrast between the formal stratified and obviously disciplined environment of the school compared to the more informal, egalitarian environment of Penan homes
- Penan children’s behaviour and learning strategies seem to be at odds with expectations of primary school teachers in Sukang (cf. Heath 1983: 344)
- teachers and members of neighbouring groups hold impressions of the Penan which reflect expectations and realisations of Penan pupils’ performances in the local school.
- only Penans speak Penan and no teachers or members of neighbouring groups can or wish to demonstrate any knowledge of Penan, nor is use of the language encouraged within the school environment, although it is not prohibited

Cummins (2000: 103) writes

virtually all theorists ... agree that the major causal factors in linguistic minority students’ underachievement are sociopolitical in nature: specifically, the coercive pattern of dominant-subordinated group relations in the wider society and the ways in which these coercive relations of power are manifested in the micro-interactions between educators and students in school.

Some account needs to be taken of Penan children’s experiences beyond the school, in order to ascertain and provide more fully for their educational needs. At a minimum, there needs to be some negotiation Penan parents and consideration of their circumstances, if there is to be any improvement in Penan children’s attendance rates besides their levels of academic success (cf. Saville-Troike 1996: 375; and Larson et al.
In sum, Penan are not currently reaping much benefit from their formal education. However, the scene is not wholly bleak. Many Penan children attend the first three years of school with some, even if irregularly, a period during which subjects are taught in the medium of Malay, including English, largely) when some do acquire basic text-literacy skills, and become monoliterate in Malay. Nonetheless, some form of orientation, offered by the national university or ministry of education, introducing teachers to the people(s) and the areas in which they will be expected to work, especially where these are remote and unfamiliar might relieve initial shock faced by teachers on arrival, and help to give teachers more positive or comprehending attitudes towards their environment.

References


Sercombe 2003


Notes

1 The national average is fifty-six people per square kilometre.

2 It is nearly one tenth of the size of the whole country, out of a total of twenty-nine sub-districts.
Four-wheel drive vehicles have reached Sukang three times from the coast (to date), on each occasion as part of a local expedition, taking upwards of three days in each case.

Apart from Penan who have become Muslims in Sukang, there are six other Muslim converts in the Dusun longhouse of whom two are Iban. There are other Dusun who have converted to Islam through marriage, who live elsewhere but who come from Sukang.

These figures (and percentages) relate only to permanent ‘Austronesian’ residents for the year 1990 (Brunei government 1991). They do not include the one Chinese (whose permanent home is downriver), other temporary residents (such as teachers from the coast), or the village policeman. In 1981, the total local population was six hundred and ninety.

Rousseau (1990: 241) suggests, in regard to Central Borneo, ‘agriculturalists rarely learn more than a few words of the neighbouring nomads’ language.’ This is generally true in Sukang but not ubiquitous in Sarawak. For example, towards the top of the Baram River, in the Sarawak villages of Long Peluan and Long Banga, a number of Sa’bans speak the Eastern Penan of their neighbours as spoken in Long Lamei and Long Beruang. Agriculturalists knowledge of Penan seems to depend a lot on individual attitudes towards and interaction with Penans as to whether or not non-Penans learn Penan. In Sukang, one or two Dusun have limited passive knowledge of Penan but they do not like to admit this knowledge nor would they have occasion to utilise it other than, perhaps, for the briefest forms of phatic communication.

Standard Malay (or Bahasa Melayu) and Brunei Malay are distinct varieties of Malay. The former is the official national language but its functional role is largely restricted to education. Even then it may be used less in official contexts than Brunei Malay, which maintains a most powerful emblematic position among the majority of Bruneains (see Martin 1996; Saxena & Sercombe 2002; and Sercombe in this volume, for further details).

Gumperz (1968; 384) states that ‘The totality of dialectal and superposed variants regularly employed within a community make up the verbal repertoire of that community.’ In the case of Sukang, only Iban is common to virtually all local residents, despite the presence, to a lesser degree, of four other languages.

See E. Kershaw (1994) for further details.

Baetens-Beardsmore (1996: 116) notes during his visits to Brunei primary schools that some teachers and principals felt that if there were more English input in lower primary this could help the shift to English medium for content subjects in the fourth year of primary school. Like Baetens-Beardsmore I think this is a highly dubious assumption, especially in Sukang Sub-district where English has virtually no role among the communities of speakers whose children attend the local school.

Martin (1996b: 133) also cites Baetens-Beardsmore’s comparison with Europe where it is claimed that due to environment, attitudes, and the circumstances within schools, use of the target language is far more likely to occur in the form of individual practice. I would concur with Martin that opportunities for the same (in either English or Bahasa Melayu, i.e., Malay) are far less available to pupils in Brunei schools. What little oral practice that does take place in classes seems to occur mostly in the form of choral chanting (cf. Baetens-Beardsmore 1996: 117; and Martin 1996b: 136).

Besides being more affluent, Iban and Dusun have access to resources through relatives, as all Iban and Dusun have family members who work on the coast and earn salaried income.

It should be added, however, that while Penan may be disproportionately represented, in terms of lack of educational success in Brunei, Braighlînm (1992) notes that throughout the country, since the introduction of bilingual education in 1985, those not from the middle and upper social classes appear to have reaped little benefit, when one considers national exam results.

I conducted a brief reading test (based on Brigham and Sercombe 1985) to measure the approximate word-comprehension levels in English among these pupils. I found that each of the three Penan pupils had a reading level of less than one hundred words after four years of formal exposure to English.