
DYSLEXIA IN MALAYSIA

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a relatively young nation, having gained independence from the British in 1957. It is a multi-ethnic society with a population of 23 million people. The Malays form the majority group (13.5 million). This is followed by the Chinese (5.6 million), Indians (1.6 million) and others (0.75 million) (*Malaysia Yearbook of Statistics*, 2000). About one-fifth of the Malaysian population are children: 2,931,847 attend primary schools while 1,999,371 are studying in secondary schools.

Education plays a vital role in achieving the country's vision of developing the full potential of the individual and fulfilling the aspiration of the Malaysian nation. Compulsory education is implemented from the ages of 6 to 17. The 1996 Education Act ensures the access to pre-school education of all children between the ages of 5 and 6. The primary school level covers a period of six years from Standard 1 to Standard 6. This is followed by three years of lower secondary school (Form 1–Form 3) and two years of upper secondary school (Form 4–Form 5). At the end of Form 5, students sit their O levels, after which students can choose to take their education to the post-secondary level which comprises another two years of formal education (Lower 6 and Upper 6). Having completed their A levels in Upper 6, students can apply for tertiary education at colleges and universities based on the criteria determined by the Education Ministry.

LANGUAGES

The national language is Bahasa Malaysia (BM). Bahasa Malaysia is also the home language of the majority group – the Malays. Most Malaysian Chinese speak Mandarin, or several other Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teo Chew, and Hainanese. The majority of Malaysian Indians speak either Tamil or other Indian dialects,

for example, Malayalese, Hindi, Punjabi, and Telegu. Generally, Malaysians are trilinguals or bilinguals at the very least. The medium of instruction in national schools¹ is the Malay language (BM). However, in the national-type schools where Chinese and Tamil serve as the medium of instruction,² Bahasa Malaysia is taught as a compulsory subject. English is the second official language in Malaysia. Therefore, it is taught in all schools as a compulsory second language.

LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

The National Philosophy of Education (1989) states that 'education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced' (p. 5). Malaysia's education system is embodied in the national ideology or the Rukunegara. The underlying objectives of the Rukunegara are to do the following:

- to develop a united nation within a plural society;
- to develop a democratic society through a constitutionally elected Parliament;
- to develop a just society with equal opportunities for all;
- to develop a progressive society orientated towards science and modern technology.

Education in Malaysia is governed by five acts, one of which is the Education Act 1996 which replaces the former 1961 Education Act (*Malaysia Education Guide*, 2000). The new Education Act 1996 is a major educational reform undertaken by the Malaysian government to provide a high standard of education to all communities in the country. This includes children with special educational needs. Prior to the 1996 Act, the special needs of blind, deaf and physically handicapped children were being met. However, the needs of children with less obvious special needs were being neglected.

In the beginning of 2001, a working panel was set up to initiate the National Dyslexia Programme in Malaysia. This comprises ministry officials from the Department of Special Needs Education, dyslexia specialists from the Universiti Putra Malaysia, clinical psychologists, pediatricians, SEN teachers, speech therapists and parents. Apart from the educational, medical and lay teams collaborating for the advancement of dyslexia awareness in Malaysia, legal parties also corroborate this work. The Malaysian Bar Council is working on a memorandum on legislation for the education of individuals with disabilities. This memorandum encompasses the needs and rights of children with specific learning difficulties.

DEFINITION

The concept of specific developmental dyslexia is very much in its infancy in Malaysia, albeit it is fast gaining public attention. Here the term has not yet been churned in the lexical oven and as such lacks sophistication and complexity. The general public seems to use the term 'dyslexia' in a broad and simple sense to mean children who are 'stuck with print'. The local usage of the term tends to coincide with the definition of the World Federation of Neurology (1968) which asserts that dyslexia is 'a disorder in children who,

despite conventional classroom experience, fail to attain the language skills of reading, writing, and spelling commensurate with their intellectual abilities’.

The Ministry of Education prefers the term ‘specific learning difficulties’ as it is a more functional definition. Their view of children with specific learning difficulties is in line with the United Kingdom’s Special Needs Code of Practice (DFE, 1994) definition which refers to children who have significant difficulties in reading, writing, spelling or manipulating numbers, which are not typical of their general level of performance. They may gain some skills in some subjects quickly and demonstrate a high level of ability orally, yet may encounter sustained difficulty in gaining literacy or numeracy skills. Such children can become severely frustrated and may also have emotional and/or behavioural difficulties.

TERMINOLOGY

The panel responsible for the National Dyslexia programme has come up with its own abridged description of specific learning difficulties or ‘disleksia’ as it is known in Bahasa Malaysia. Tentatively, the operational definition of ‘disleksia’ refers to children who have a general level of performance which is similar to or above other children but have significant difficulty in fluent and accurate word reading and spelling.

PREVALENCE

To date, no research evidence is available on the prevalence of dyslexia in Malaysia. A pilot study (Gomez, 2000) conducted in a representative primary school of 2,000 pupils near Kuala Lumpur indicated that 7 per cent of Standard 2 Malay pupils had marked phonological reading difficulties (dyslexia). Although this study is an isolated case, it reveals that there are children with specific reading difficulties (dyslexia) in Malaysia. Many Malaysian parents are becoming more aware of dyslexia and suspect their children are dyslexic. They are continually seeking help from the Education Ministry and professionals in this field. Their cries for help and dialogues with top ministry officials from the Department of Special Needs Education have led to the initiation of a dyslexia programme at the national level.

IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT

Identification in primary schools

Presently there are no Malaysian standardized instruments to identify children with specific reading difficulties. In March 2001, the Ministry of Education officials from the Department of Special Needs collaborated with professionals from the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) to formulate a checklist for screening all Malaysian children in Standard 1 for specific reading difficulties (dyslexia). The checklist (known as ‘Senarai Semak Disleksia’) consists of three elements: (i) pupils’ level of mastery in reading and writing (spelling) and numeracy skills (difficulties); (ii) teachers’/parents’ perception of pupils’

abilities (strengths); and (iii) predictors of dyslexia. The 'Senarai Semak Disleksia' is issued to both the class teacher and parents of Standard 1 children. This screening instrument is currently being piloted in several primary schools nationwide.

Assessment in primary and secondary schools

Similar to identification, assessment of children with specific learning difficulties ('disleksia') in primary and secondary schools is not available. No Malaysian standardized assessment is yet available. The panel of experts of the National Dyslexia Programme are presently formulating a Dyslexia Reading Test to assess children who have been screened. This assessment instrument is still in its early days of development.

INTERVENTION AND RESOURCES

Thus far, interventions and resources for Malaysian children with dyslexia are limited. Although many enthusiastic parents, Rotary Clubs and NGOs have been supportive of the needs of children with dyslexia, the help rendered is rather basic and small-scale. Only recently the Education Ministry, after being spurred on by the demands of parents and informed others, has embarked on a National Dyslexia Programme. Hopefully, with the keen involvement of the Malaysian government, greater intervention measures will be developed and greater resources will be made available to the masses of children with dyslexia.

TEACHER TRAINING

There is acute need for all Malaysian teachers to be made aware of specific learning difficulties if help is to be made available for children with dyslexia in mainstream schools. Teachers need training in the appropriate knowledge and skills to facilitate identification and intervention. The Specialist Teacher Training College in Kuala Lumpur has long-term and short-term courses to train teachers in Special Educational Needs, inclusive of dyslexia. A few local universities are initiating courses in dyslexia to increase awareness and train teachers in this specialized area.

ADVOCACY GROUPS

Parent support groups and NGOs have been instrumental in advancing dyslexia awareness in Malaysia. The Kuala Lumpur Dyslexia Association is a charitable organization concerned with the education and welfare of dyslexic children and adults. Since its inception in 1995, the association has been responsible for conducting seminars and workshops to educate the community about dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties. The centre also conducts psychological and educational assessments to diagnose children with dyslexia. Once their dyslexia has been verified by a clinical psychologist, these children

are offered tutoring in Bahasa Malaysia, English and Mathematics. The tuition is conducted individually or in small groups by skilled teachers trained in multi-sensory methods. The Bureau of Learning Difficulties (BOLD) in Penang provides similar facilities for dyslexics.

THE WAY AHEAD

With the Malaysian government taking a positive and strong lead, nationwide help for children with dyslexia is underway. However, screening and assessment instruments together with intervention procedures take a while to be implemented. So far, help for children with dyslexia has been scarce and isolated. Those living in Kuala Lumpur and Penang have benefited from the initiatives of proactive parents and NGOs. In the near future the Malaysian government, collaborating with universities, teacher training colleges, NGOs, psychologists, medical experts, speech therapists, researchers and parents, will further propel dyslexia awareness, identification, and remediation to the foreground.

NOTES

- 1 This is a government or government-aided school using the national language as the main medium of instruction and English is a compulsory subject of instruction. The teaching of Chinese or Tamil is made available if there is a request from at least 15 parents of the pupils in the school.
- 2 This is a government or government-aided school using Chinese or Tamil as the main medium of instruction and both the national and English languages are compulsory subjects of instruction.

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