Community

Profesor Turun Padang: Cultivating Environmental English Literacy with School Pupils of the Orang Asli Community

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KUALA LIPIS, 3 December 2023 – The Orang Asli (OA) community in Malaysia constitutes about 1% of the total population, and in Pahang, the OA community is the largest in Peninsular Malaysia.

There are numerous government initiatives for the OA community, including economic development, healthcare, cultural preservation, and social welfare programmes.

In the education sector, despite efforts by the government and relevant stakeholders to develop the OA community, there are still a number of challenges faced to ensure the community, especially the school pupils, receives quality education.

These challenges include limited educational resources and materials and socioeconomic constraints on the family to support their children's education.

These challenges are intensified when it comes to the provision of quality English language education. Therefore, it is essential to emphasise English language content with the OA community, particularly the youth.

With this concern in light, the Centre for Modern Languages (CML), in collaboration with the Centre for Industry & Community Network (ICoN), Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA), organised a corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme under the 'Profesor Turun Padang' (PTP) initiative.

The key objective of this initiative is to help enhance the English language skills of the secondary school pupils of the OA community.

The OA community in focus is the people of the Semai tribe in Kuala Lipis, Pahang.

Semai communities traditionally live in rural areas, often in villages located within the lush rainforests and hilly terrains of Pahang.

Like many other OA tribes, the Semai people place a strong emphasis on preserving their languages and cultural heritage.

Due to this, improving English language competencies is not a main priority for this community, and hence, the significance of the current PTP programme.



All facilitators, participants and school representatives at the end of the programme

The PTP programme was held at the SMK RPS Betau, Kuala Lipis, on 2 December 2023. Eighty-one secondary school pupils and three teachers of the SMK RPS Betau were involved in the programme.

The CML, UMPSA team was led by Associate Professor Dr. Hafizoah Kassim and her team of seven facilitators, including Dr. Fatimah Ali, Nur Syafawati Sabuan, Rosjuliana Hidayu Rosli, Dr. Nor Yazi Khamis, Dr. Azwin Arif Abdul Rahim, Mohd Shafeirul Zaman Abdul Majid and Dr. Mohamad Musab Azmat Ali.

The PTP programme utilised a module entitled Pick&Tell, an English language module applying an outdoor learning approach.

The module encourages learners to utilise objects in the environment to draw, tell and create stories. The pupils were also able to express their creativity and enhance their confidence in using the English language during the activities.

The Semai people have a strong reliance on and bond with nature, whose lifestyle is deeply rooted in their cultural traditions and connection to the natural environment.

For this reason, the PTP programme highlighted the outdoor learning approach to entice the young pupils to enhance their English language skills while playing in and with the objects in the environment.

Via the Pick&Tell module, the goal of the PTP programme is therefore two-fold: to improve the pupils' English language skills and instil the importance of protecting the environment and promoting its sustainability.

This initiative therefore supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) particularly the SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 13: Climate Action.



Introducing the participants to the SDGs

Three activities were carried out with the pupils using the Pick&Tell module. In the final activity, while going against their timid personality, the pupils needed to present their story to the whole audience.

They did a great job embracing the challenge with new knowledge and skills learnt.

In her closing speech, Mrs. Mariam Anson@Hassan, GPK Hal Ehwal Murid SMK RPS Betau, expressed her gratitude to the CML team and UMPSA for the opportunity given through the programme, highlighted the uniqueness of the programme and reminded the pupils of the importance of English language, especially for their future.

The PTP programme exposes the CML team to the lifestyle, challenges and needs of the Orang Asli community especially regarding quality education, and promises for better opportunities for both parties to collaborate particularly on CSR programmes.

For the opportunity given and the experiences gained, the CML team is tremendously grateful to all involved especially to the School Principal, Mr. Mat Daud Mamat.

In brief, while English can be a valuable skill for accessing certain opportunities, there is a need to balance between the practical considerations of English language education and the cultural heritage of the OA communities.

Cultural sensitivity and community involvement are essential aspects of any language-related initiatives in OA communities.

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