International Journal of Educational Development 30 (2010) 625–635

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Language and education: The experience of the Penan in Brunei

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Penan
Minority
Language education
Literacy

ABSTRACT

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 categorization. This is part of a larger consideration of ways in which Penan have been adapting to settlement, since they gave up a nomadic hunting and gathering existence (Sercombe, 2007), a significant aspect of which is processes of socialization and ways in which formal education has impacted on the lives of Penan in Brunei. 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 this affects Penan children's educational progress, as well as suggesting strategies that might be implemented for the benefit of all stakeholders.

1. 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 categorization. This is part of a larger consideration of ways in which Penan have been adapting to settlement, since they gave up a nomadic hunting and gathering existence (Sercombe, 2007), a significant aspect of which is processes of socialization and ways in which formal education has impacted on the lives of Penan in Brunei. 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.

2. Physical and social context

2.1. Geography

The Penan comprise a discrete community of around 55 people, permanently settled only since 1962. Previously, they were hunter–gatherers in the rainforest of southern Brunei and neighboring Sarawak, in East Malaysia (Sercombe, 2002). The 2700 km^2 Belait River basin, where the Penan live, is composed

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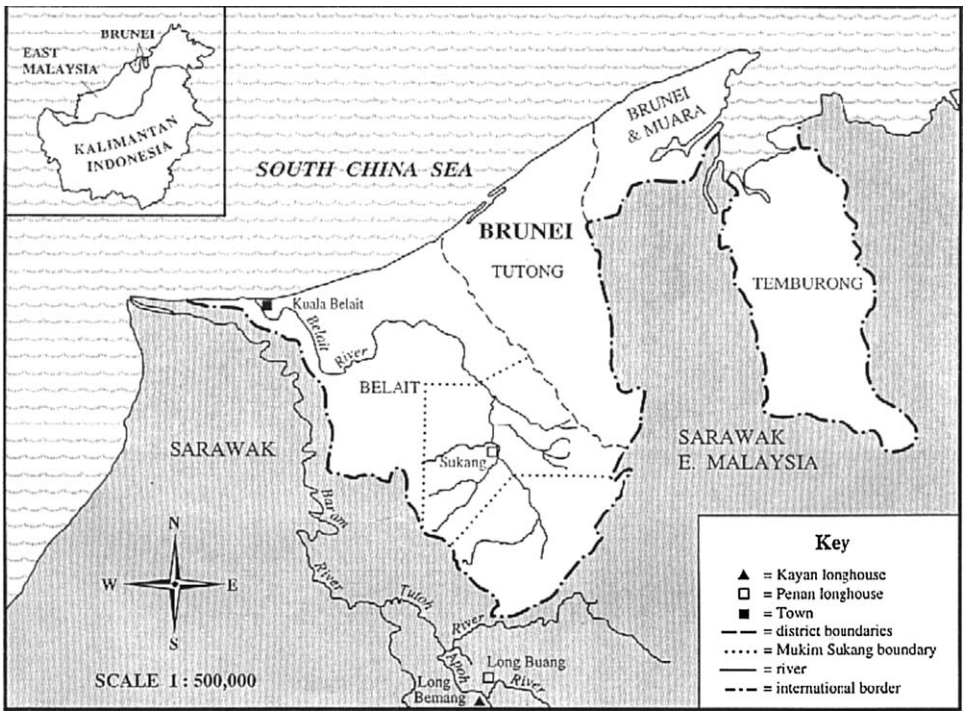
doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2010.05.001



Map 1. Sukang Sub-district (*Mukim*), in the context of Belait District in Brunei.

mostly of primary rainforest, and is sparsely populated with an average of less than 10 people per km^2 [1]; 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 (see Map 1)[2]
- the least populated sub-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 (both of these otherwise being a significant numerical presence in coastal parts of Brunei)
- economically focused on subsistence agriculture, and is
- 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 neighboring communities live and interact for, as Gal (1979, p. 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 speakers' social networks.' Consequently, part of this article's purpose is to clarify the ecology of the local linguistic heterogeneity and show how this affects the position of the Penan.

2.2. Sukang Village

Sukang Village is set within Sukang Sub-district (as delineated within small dotted lines on Map 1) in a large area, comprising primary as well as old growth secondary rainforest. It is presently only accessible by a 2-h private boat journey from the nearest small downriver settlement, from where there is road access to Kuala Belait, the district's main coastal town. Of importance is the relatively remote location of Sukang Sub-district, 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. This contributes to a sense of being removed from the dominating and homogenizing effects of national culture (cf. Steward, 1972, p. 50; Rousseau, 1990; Verdery, 1994).[3] Due to this relative isolation, inhabitants of Sukang show fewer signs of being absorbed into the Malay-dominated majority of Brunei's population (cf. Brown, 1970, p. 4). Furthermore, this separation reflects a different local social ecology (notions of which are considered further below), especially with regard to language. However, the government's Islamic Propagation Centre (*Pusat Dakwah*) actively proselytizes in Sukang. It has gained a number of converts, including 12 Penan in Sukang (who are offered financial incentives to embrace Islam). Even so, there remains little sign that Penan have undergone deep cultural shifts in their daily behavior or practices.[4] Sukang Village comprises an eight-door single-storey Penan longhouse and a small four-door Dusun longhouse. There is also a village school that constitutes an important social gathering place, not only for staff, pupils and occasional visitors to the school, but also as a location for village meetings. There is also a small medical clinic, a sub-district police post, a government rest house, a small Muslim chapel (*surau*) and four small government-provided houses, used as teachers' quarters. The population of the sub-district (as shown in Table 1) has been declining, slowly but steadily, over the years, with a steady shift of inhabitants to the coast. Currently, inhabitants of Sukang make their livelihood locally, via the

[1] The national average is 56 people per square kilometer.

[2] It is nearly one tenth of the size of the whole country, out of a total of 29 sub-districts.

[3] 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.

[4] 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 originate from Sukang.

Table 1
Population of Sukang Sub-district (total 430)[a], as delineated in Map 1.

	Dusun	Iban	Penan
Numbers (%)	37 (9%)	338 (79%)	55 (12%)
Official status	Indigenous	Non-indigenous	Non-indigenous

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

[a] 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 690.

subsistence cultivation of hill rice. Sukang remains economically traditional compared to coastal areas of Brunei, where subsistence farming no longer takes place. A few Sukang residents have salaried teaching jobs, or wage-work as cooks or grass-cutters in the village. Most residents also 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, are the teacher-outsiders from coastal areas who, being Malay, form a distinct minority in the context of Sukang (as shown in Table 1).

My position is that there are three distinct ethnolinguistic groups local to Sukang, as district inhabitants themselves identify: the Dusun are the smallest group (at only 37) 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 as part of the pan-Malay community. As the only officially indigenous group, the sub-district headman (*penghulu*) is drawn from among the Dusun to oversee the different village communities in the sub-district, on behalf of the Belait District resident and the national government.

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'. 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 Sukang Sub-district as well as 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 constitute the largest single ethnolinguistic group in Sarawak,[5] frequently travelling between Brunei and Sarawak during festival periods.

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. Rousseau (1990, p. 245) pertinently observes that in Borneo 'agriculturalists see nomads as inferior and the latter behave as if they accept this evaluation,' as is common with regard to nomads and ex-nomads universally (cf. Barth, 1969, p. 31). Some Bruneians do not even know of the existence of Penan in Brunei. If they are aware of this ethnic group, it is generally by name only, little being known of their cultural practices or language.[6] Penan in Brunei are generally less mobile than Dusun and Iban due largely to the cost of river transport in the face of their financial poverty. Since settling, they 'have had only sporadic contact with their nearest relatives, the Penan of Long Buang, of the Apoh River ... in Sarawak' (Sercombe, 1996, p. 52; see Map 1, in this article), since settling in Brunei in 1962. In Sarawak, there remains (for Penan) a constant struggle with the state and federal governments, especially in relation to the issue of logging, as discussed by Sellato and Sercombe (2007, pp. 34–41). Penan in Sarawak number around 4500 (Brosius, 2007), but accurate numbers are very hard to come by. The circumstances of Penan in Brunei are rather different from those in Sarawak, including: religious affiliation (many Penan in Sarawak have converted to Christianity, while those in Brunei remain animist or have become, nominally at least, Muslim); political orientation (Penan in Brunei having little or no political agenda, while those in Sarawak are often politically active regularly lobbying the state government in an effort to protect native rights and their local environment). Regarding lack of educational success, however, there are similarities between Penan in Brunei and those in Sarawak.

3. Language ecology and use in Sukang Sub-district

'Language ecology may be defined as the study of interactions between any given language and its environment' (Haugen, 1972, p. 35). This notion has been further refined by others, such as Mühlhäusler (1996), who describes language ecology as 'a metaphor derived from the study of living beings', whereby 'one can study languages as one studies the interrelationship of organisms with and within their environments' (Mühlhäusler, 1996, p. 1), recognizing the diversity within languages, as well as between them. Nonetheless, Mühlhäusler accepts that such a metaphor can be problematic, not least the challenge of taking account of 'a very large number of parameters and interrelationships' (Mühlhäusler, 1996, p. 322) within any particular setting. More recently, Mufwene (2001, p. 22) points out the salience of 'interidiolectal variation' (i.e. differences in language use between speakers from the same local language community), given that 'All aspects of variation accessible to speakers bear on choices that they make consciously or unconsciously in their speech acts.' The points above, by Mühlhäusler and Mufwene, are accepted but for the purposes of this article language ecology remains largely at the somewhat crude level of language. This does not affect the arguments being made here, which can be seen to apply to all members of the Penan in Brunei, given the focus is on the group, rather than its individual members, and because their disadvantaged circumstances apply to all Penan in Brunei. Below, salient aspects of Sukang's local language ecology are described.

Patterns of language knowledge and use in Sukang are different from those in Brunei's coastal areas. Sukang Sub-district is an areal speech community, also comprising three distinct smaller 'speech communities', whereby each of the local, or Sukang, languages has intra-ethnic functions (Sercombe, 2003). 'Sukang is one of the few areas in Brunei where a form of Brunei Malay does not fulfill the role of lingua franca' (Martin and Sercombe, 1996, p. 307), except among teachers posted there, who originate from coastal parts of the country. In connection, the matter of Malay language varieties is a complex one, with a diverse array just within Brunei, four principal dialects being identified by Nothofer (1991): Brunei Malay, Kampong Ayer, Kadayan and Standard Malay.

The local lingua franca in Sukang Sub-district is Iban for all informal inter-ethnic communication, as well as some formal interaction (Nothofer, 1991; Martin and Sercombe, 1996), and knowledge of this language is acquired by non-Iban through regular interaction among members of the three local language groups. Iban's role tends to reduce 'intergroup differences' (cf. Blanc, 1994, p. 356). 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 and are not appointed to positions of responsibility in Brunei's civil service. Additionally, Iban (and, hence, their language) have relatively low social status in coastal

[5] Until 1973, when Malay became an official language in Sarawak, Iban was the predominant lingua franca in this East Malaysian state (Adelaar, 2010).

[6] When I worked at the University of Brunei Darussalam and surveyed students regarding their awareness of Brunei ethnic groups, I found that few had heard of Penan and those who had, were not aware that there were Penan (citizens) in Brunei.

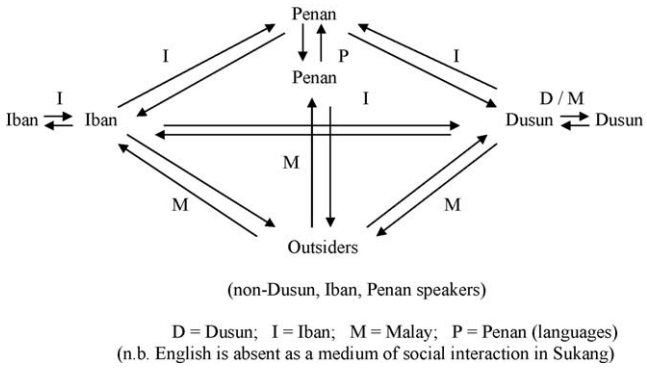


Fig. 1. General patterns of language use in Sukang Sub-district.

areas of Brunei, as non-Muslims who work mainly as manual laborers. All Dusun and Penan (in Sukang) speak Iban fluently. (Fig. 1 illustrates general patterns of language use in Sukang, by which one can see that Iban is the most widely used language.)

Dusun is the indigenous language of Sukang district with the highest official status, since the Dusun are classified as Malay. Dusun is perceived as a dialect of Malay (in official terms), although the two languages are mutually incomprehensible. It is not otherwise widely used (certainly not beyond the Dusun communities in Brunei) and is not promoted or supported by the nation's language and literature bureau, *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*.

Dusun has the smallest number of speakers in the sub-district. Few Iban or Penan have more than the scantiest knowledge of Dusun.

Penan is a language of Central Borneo and part of the sub-group of Kenyah languages. A feature of Penan is the retention of Proto-Austronesian infixation (*-n-*, occurring in verbs with undergoer focus), which has evanesced among other languages of the same sub-group (Sercombe, 2006). Knowledge and use of Penan is exclusive to the Penan community, for intra-ethnic communication, and virtually unknown to anyone else in Brunei.[7] Penan is Sukang's lowest status language, yet has the highest number of first language speakers in Sukang Village. Penan is a vernacular language and the sole mother tongue of all Penan in Sukang (cf. Brisset, 2000). Intergenerational transmission of Penan continues in Sukang, while the situation is more complex in Sarawak, where Penan is transmitted more comprehensively where there are high concentrations of Penan, principally in upriver areas. Downriver, there is evidence of gradual attrition via borrowing from neighboring languages, or abandonment of Penan in favor of a language of settled neighbors (Needham, 1965), often following inter-ethnic marriage. A number of factors suggest Penan is an endangered language in Brunei, not least Krauss's (1992) suggestion that any language with fewer than 10,000 speakers is likely to be at risk. The total number of Penan overall is much less than this; Penan is used solely for intra-ethnic functions; there is evidence of borrowing into Penan, from Iban and Malay (Sercombe, 2002). The language receives no official support (although official approval of my fieldwork can be seen as a form of incipient support), in Brunei or Malaysia. For Penan, it is unlikely that language maintenance, what Grenoble and Whaley (2006, p. 13) refer to as protection 'against the imposition of outside attitudes', will be achieved through institutional support alone. In terms of Thomason and Kaufman's (1988, pp. 74–109) proposed scale of language change, Penan appears to be at level 2, meaning 'slightly more intense contact' with other languages; and, there is concomitant lexical and structural borrowing, reflected through increased lexical variability, reduced morphosyntactic complexity in Penan, along with a preference for analytic rather than synthetic constructions in Penan (Sercombe, 2002).

There are two non-local languages within Sukang, English and standard Malay. These have mainly (prescribed) institutional functions. As mentioned, the national lingua franca, Brunei Malay, is largely restricted to ethnically Malay teachers originating from outside Sukang. Standard Malay (SM, or *Bahasa Malaysia*, 'Malaysian language') and Brunei Malay (BM) are distinct varieties. SM is the official national language of Brunei (as well as Malaysia and Singapore) and is often referred to as *Bahasa Melayu* ('Malay language' with overtones of ethnic exclusivity, compared to *Bahasa Malaysia*), in Brunei. SM's role is largely restricted to education, although it can occur in other public spheres, especially the print media. Even then, it may be used less in official contexts than BM, which maintains a powerful emblematic position among the majority of Bruneians as 'the *de facto* national dialect in the country' (Martin, 1996a, p. 36; see also Saxena and Sercombe, 2002). Nothofer (1991, p. 153) estimates a cognate percentage, between BM and SM, of 84%. The main differences between BM and SM occur in terms of their sound systems. Lexically, the two varieties also show differences to the extent that BM merits its own dictionary (Kulit, 1991). Morphologically, BM has a smaller set of affixes than SM. BM also has a unique feature, the unbound particle *bah*, the primary function being concurrence, besides also suggesting 'the speaker and the listener are members of the Brunei speech community' (Ożóg and Martin, 1996, p. 244). For a first language speaker of SM speaker, BM would not be comprehensible (without previous exposure to this variety), while for BM first language speakers SM is likely to be comprehensible as a variety of wider inter-ethnic use and an official medium of education throughout the Malay Archipelago.

SM is used more than BM in Sukang and tends mostly to fulfill, what Mühlhäusler (1996, p. 56) calls, an 'informative role'. However, among those Dusun who have embraced Islam, some have begun to use BM, within the community and the family, as a first language, to demonstrate affiliation with Malayness and modernity, they say,[8] although Penan and Iban converts to Islam in Sukang do not appear to be following this trend.

Finally, in Sukang, there is English which is restricted almost exclusively to the primary school curriculum and some local television programs (although the Penan have no functioning television set). 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, with the government requiring an 'O' level pass in English for students to be able to proceed to English or Malay medium higher education in Brunei.

English has no role as a means of authentic interaction in Sukang Sub-district compared to the extent of its presence in the media and on the coast, where there is a relatively large proportion of first and second language speakers of English, both elite locals and expatriates, as documented by Saxena and Sercombe (2002). The only reasonably competent speakers of English in Sukang include one local and two non-local teachers who were trained in

[7] Rousseau (1990, p. 241) suggests, with reference to Central Borneo: 'agriculturalists rarely learn more than a few words of the neighboring nomads' language.' This is true of Penan 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'ban speak the Penan of their neighbors, as spoken in Long Lamei and Long Beruang. Agriculturalists' knowledge of Penan seems to depend a lot on individual attitudes towards and interaction with Penan. In Sukang, one or two Dusun have limited passive knowledge of Penan but they do not like to admit this knowledge.

[8] See Kershaw (1994) for further details.

English medium at the national university. If visitors do come to Sukang, the likelihood is that they know Malay or are accompanied by others who know Malay or, possibly, Dusun or Iban and that conversation will be conducted in one of these languages.

Consequently, five separate languages occur within the sub-district: three 'Sukang' languages, Iban, Dusun and Penan; and two 'non-Sukang' languages, English and Malay,[9] comprising a sub-district language ecology quite distinct from that of the rest of Brunei. English and Malay are superimposed supraregional and national languages, respectively. 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, in the latter three years of primary school for: Religious Studies, Malay Language, Civics and Physical Education. Malay is also used as a means of disseminating government information as well as for religious prosyletization. While nationally Malay is dominant, its position can be seen as ecologically peripheral within Sukang Sub-district, compared to the central role of Iban as a lingua franca.

4. Sukang Primary School

Schools mirror society rather than leading innovation, and this is as true of Sukang as it is of other Brunei government (primary) schools, where one of the key aims is national socialization through education to essentialize and homogenize the populace into a single citizenry with a common language, set of beliefs and values (cf. Williams, 1991; Saxena, 2007).

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' foreign language; and Sukang seems to reflect a UNESCO (2005, p. 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, as suggested by Ricento (2006, p. 5): 'Decisions about which languages will be planned for what purposes ultimately reflect power relations among different groups.' In the case of Sukang, there has been little attempt to engage parents in their children's schooling. However, it has been emphasized (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.

Sukang Village School is similar to any other in Brunei, in terms of its official remit, but it is marked in terms of its remote location, the composition of its population and its language ecology, which can and do affect the academic progress of local school children. For example, parent–teacher meetings, either formal or informal, do not take place in Sukang, while being formally scheduled in coastal area schools. As Saville-Troike (1996, p. 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', referred to as MIB) the nation's predominantly promulgated dogma: 'one nation' (in the form of one ethnic group), 'one religion' and 'one ruler', this being continually articulated in government communications with local subjects, as well as being integrated into the national school curriculum through Civics classes, with the effect of reducing linguistic diversity across the country (Saxena, 2007; cf. also Martin and Poedjosoedarmo, 1996) and a means of legitimizing the status quo.

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). The increasing proportion of Penan children, at the local school, can be accounted for by the general lack of mobility of Penan adults, who are financially poor compared to those from the other groups, and whose children at the local school are declining in number (Sercombe, 2007). Dusun and Iban parents are tending to relocate downriver to urban areas, or are sending their children to live with relatives on the coast where there is easier 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 poor material circumstances. While Penan comprise the largest proportion of pupils (comprising 20 out of a total of 43 children) at the local school, Penan are not represented among the teaching staff. The only official adult Penan presence around the school is the Penan headman, a grass-cutter, with an annual stipend for his community leadership role.

Sukang School is disadvantaged compared to schools in coastal areas, having fewer resources: electricity is available only part of the day; half the teachers, from elsewhere in Brunei, are not generally interested in working at the school (and they receive no orientation regarding the school or locality to which they have been posted) and cannot speak the local languages. Most outside teachers reveal a sense of culture shock at being posted upriver by Brunei's ministry of education; and the prevailing sentiments among these teachers result in frequent periods of absence from the village school during term time, further depriving students of academic support.[10] 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). There is also little access to television or print media and the Internet is not available, these being taken for granted in coastal areas. The very small school library is kept locked, thus children have limited or tightly controlled access to this resource. Nonetheless, 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 economic lot, if they have aspirations beyond a subsistence lifestyle (cf. Nagata, 1979, p. 240). As UNESCO (2005, p. 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.'

I made more over a dozen trips, lasting two weeks or more, to Sukang, between 1992 and 2002, with subsequent visits in 2005 and 2007. Throughout each stay, most weekday mornings were spent in the village primary school (during term time), to observe interaction in classes, mostly as a non-participant,[11] primarily

[9] Gumperz (1968, p. 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.

[10] In 2002, a group of non-local ethnically Malay teachers made their first visit to a neighboring Iban village, with me, after a year of working in Sukang. 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 1-h visit.

[11] There were many occasions, if a teacher was absent, when I was asked to teach an upper primary class, so that pupils at least received some academic support.

between: Penan children; Penan and non-Penan children; and Penan children and teachers; as well as the kinds of interaction that took place among adults from different language backgrounds. The approach here can be seen as a form of applied ethnography (Chambers, 2003), rooted in an interest in Penan and their welfare, taking stock of how and the extent to which Penan participate in interaction as well as languages they use. Theoretically, my position can be allied to a weak form of social constructivism and is ontologically relative, on the basis that the circumstances of Penan are uniformly, if not absolutely, similar, as mirrored in an utterance made by an ex-hunter–gatherer in the Indonesian part of Borneo: 'We are stuck at the bottom' (Kaskija, 2007, p. 163). My descriptions were undertaken (as recordings were not permitted) on the basis of observations: during classroom lessons; in the staffroom; in the school dining hall at lunch times; and the school kitchen, where staff congregate for mid-morning break and lunch. I also spent periods in the Penan longhouse, as well as undertaking informal visits to the homes of other local (Dusun and Iban) residents (details of which are considered in Sercombe, 2007), to gain an impression of attitudes held towards the Penan. Data were organized to establish a taxonomy of dyadic and polyadic language interaction(s), including: who spoke what, to whom, when, where and why, to draw inferences about the local language ecology.

Observation of what takes place in the school, especially behavior of non-local teachers, suggests there are common expectations that seem to reflect the myth of a 'universal child' (Christie and Harris, 1985, p. 81). Little credence is given to, for example, local children's world views and cultural practices (Henze, 1992, p. 48). Furthermore, teachers' stereotyping of Penan (from personal conversations with them) as a non-conformist outgroup seems to affect children's' performances (cf. Topping, 1992) and results in the early exit of Penan from school, especially girls, although there are also domestic reasons that compound these departures and absences, especially parents' need for assistance with subsistence farm work.

4.1. 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, via regular alternating use of languages among local teachers and pupils, can be observed in the village primary school. In Sukang School, there is much teacher talk and little student participation, especially in the transition year (four), meant to be predominantly English medium, compared to the first three years of Malay-medium education. Throughout the upper years (four to six), teachers appear to lecture students. There is heavy reliance on teacher control to maintain conformity, convergent thinking and passive intake, as opposed to encouraging more independent and participatory styles of learning (cf. Cummins, 1986). Teachers appear to operate on the basis that learning is primarily a case of transmission from teacher to child, despite being exposed to ideas, in their teacher training, that children construct knowledge through their own thought processes and interactions with objects, ideas and the surrounding world.

No official allowance is made for children who come from non-Malay-speaking backgrounds; children from linguistic minorities need to become proficient in Malay (as well as English), if they are to succeed academically. As Kotzé (1994, p. 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, p. 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 also be harmful, denying children's prior knowledge and skills in the home language, as well as the identity and self-respect of the child. As UNESCO (2005, p. 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', as has proved to be the case among Penan in Brunei. Patterns of language use in Sukang Primary School can be configured, as below:

(i) Non-Sukang teachers speak to other non-Sukang teachers in BM, since this is their first language and the default national code.
(ii) Non-Sukang teachers speak SM to local (Sukang) teachers, including the head teacher, non-teaching staff and villagers; it is the official national language, is commonly understood, and is a designated code of the school. Some teachers originating from Sukang have knowledge of BM but not one of the non-local teachers can speak Dusun, Iban or Penan.
(iii) Non-Sukang teachers use SM with pupils as the official language medium. This is in addition to English which is used to a limited extent in English-medium classes. All teachers have either trained in a predominantly monolingual (Malay) or bilingual (English dominant, with some Malay) medium paradigm, but most of their social and cultural experiences have been in BM-dominant contexts. Non-local teachers are effectively monolingual in Sukang for social interaction. None of them knows any of the languages used in Sukang Sub-district, only two local inhabitants are functionally proficient in English; and Malay is a minority language in Sukang. While Martin (1996b, p. 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 SM and English.
(iv) Local teachers use SM with the school's head teacher in formal circumstances, or when non-local teachers are present; otherwise they use Iban, the local lingua franca.
(v) Non-teaching staff (who comprise the Iban school gardener and two female Dusun cooks) speak Iban to local teaching staff. The Iban gardener always speaks Iban in the school, regardless of whom he is addressing, with the result that non-local teachers are excluded.
(vi) Local teachers speak to pupils in SM, or English (albeit rarely). They also use Iban if interacting informally. In class, they use mostly SM, although small amounts of English are used in English-medium classes where this is seen as comprehensible.
(vii) Pupils address teachers in either English, SM or Iban, depending on the teacher being addressed, the degree of formality of the interaction and the subject. For example, brief formulaic requests for permission to go to the toilet are made in English in all classes, except kindergarten and primary one in which pupils often inadvertently use their first languages. Otherwise, formal interaction tends to be in SM, even in English classes, except when children are required to repeat an utterance or chorally drill a structure in English.
(viii) Pupils address others of the same ethnic background in their own language much of the time, otherwise Iban is the inter-ethnic lingua franca. 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 this can upset non-local teachers as they are excluded through lack of comprehension.

5. The language education situation of Penan children in Sukang

In this section, some 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). Brunei's ministry of education might argue that its minorities' numbers make it impractical to accommodate them in terms of first language instruction, and expect that minority groups will assimilate to the national language variety which, to some extent, the Dusun are doing (see Kershaw, 1994, for further details). Iban have been able to make the most of formal education without undergoing, so far, language or culture attrition (Sercombe, 1999),[12] even among those who have (nominally) embraced Islam.

The consistently poor results obtained by Penan children suggest that the limited educational resources available in the school are not achieving desired returns (cf. Romaine, 1995). Since 1962, only one Penan has progressed to secondary level education. However, this is not too surprising in the light of Cummins' (cited in Eggington, 1992, p. 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.'

Malay and English are decontextualized in Sukang, in that they perform relatively few meaningful functions (although this is less the case with SM); and, thus, literacy presented through these languages tends to be isolated from daily experience, being the object rather than the vehicle for analysis. One can argue that it is beneficial for pupils to learn through SM in Sukang since it is useful to those who move beyond 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 integration with Brunei's larger populace. However, Penan children, in particular, fail to gain adequate Malay language skills to progress academically partly due to a paucity of exposure to SM: at home, in school, and through limited access to media other than radio.

Neither Malay nor English surrounds children in Sukang in their daily lives, unless they travel to coastal areas. Uniform lack of Penan educational and material success are but two aspects of their non-integration into society at large (see Sercombe, 2007 for further details), reflecting Blommaert's (2006, p. 238) point: 'official administrative belonging – being a citizen of a state – is a poor indicator of sociolinguistic belonging.' Compared to Dusun and Iban (who have a history of settlement, greater social status and wealth, comprise much larger groups in Brunei, are more attuned to the demands of the modern world and regularly travel beyond Sukang Sub-district). However, Penan lack of success at school is not unique to Brunei, as similar situations hold among Penan in Malaysian Sarawak (Sercombe, 2010), again, where Penan are frequently located in isolated rural areas and suffer similar kinds of status and material disadvantage. In Sarawak, a number of Penan headmen evaluated government rural educational provision with the lowest possible rating of 'F' (Sarawak-News, 2002). Much of this has to do with perceptions of ways in which Penan children are treated, by teachers, and the high drop-out rates of these children from primary schools, in comparison to pupils from other ethnic groups.

Compared to Dusun and Iban, there appears a schism between the traditionally oral, fluid and non-hierarchical organization 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. pp. 81–82). Failure among the Penan at school is partially due to the gulf between the daily practices, values and norms of the school compared to those of the Penan (Sercombe, 2007). Among the Penan, relationships are symbiotic and defined by consanguine and affinal links, such that school-age Penan children are often required to help with planting and harvesting rice, regardless of the school's schedule and attendance requirements.

Penan parents do not stress individual 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 Penan homes 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 overtly concerned. Furthermore, Penan parents feel they can do little about this state of affairs; and this is not surprising given their lack of formal or informal participation in the local school.

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 public criticisms of each other (other than in gentle jest) and can be cowed when this is done in earnest, as happens not infrequently at school when Penan are chastised by teachers for not responding to questions. Kinds of assessment that pupils undergo, in terms of testing and examinations, do not take account of skills Penan possess. The majority of Bruneians (unless they live by subsistence in rural areas) know little about the flora and fauna of their country, to the same degree as Penan, although this knowledge does seem to be in decline (Voeks and Sercombe, 2000).

Traditionally, Penan learn by observation and imitation rather than through verbal instruction. The functions of talk, for Penan, appear primarily concerned with establishing and maintaining social relations rather than for transactional purposes. Hallpike (1979, p. 129) suggests that language in non-literate societies is not so much a conceptual tool as a fundamental means of interaction, and cannot be 'disassociated from the context of utterance.' 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 may not feel a part of the classroom community. Teachers' use of abstract language and materials, with reference to 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 behavior and can be frowned on 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. Furthermore, I never observed a Penan child being asked for

[12] Baetens-Beardsmore (1996, p. 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.

Table 2
Features of literate and non-literate societies.

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

Adapted from Topping (1992, p. 29).

a Penan term (equivalent to the English or SM), or about flora, fauna or practices that might be familiar to Penan. Teachers generally appear unable (or unwilling) to understand why Penan pupils are 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, particularly those not from Sukang, have little understanding of norms of Penan language behavior and ascribe Penan low social status, this latter sometimes being openly expressed at the village school.

Verbally articulating greetings is also alien, as is publicly expressing gratitude to others given Penan, by default, are constantly doing 'favors' for each other, as an integral dimension of the symbiotic relationships comprising mutual rights and obligations, within the Penan community (Sercombe, 2007), such that explicit thanks would not expected. No account in school is taken of problems particular to Penan children regarding their material poverty, such that Penan are frequently castigated for arriving in school bare-footed or in torn clothes. 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 their own community, Penan children are mostly with their parents or relatives constantly, or are seen as mature enough and, hence, relatively autonomous beings, able to make their own decisions, so unlikely is an individual to behave in a socially deviant manner.

In connection, concerns arise in discussing literacy. First, there is the notion of literacy; while Penan in Brunei have no access to printed matter in their own language, they are literate in other ways, prompting one to think anew about what literacy means and the 'creative and original ways in which people transform literacy to their own cultural concerns and interests' (Street, 1993, p. 1), in this case non-text-based materials. Traditionally, Penan place messages for each other in the rainforest through the use of cut flora arranged in particular ways (see, for example, Chen, 1990), although this practice is now in decline. This is unknown and has little prestige among non-Penan, and certainly not in the context of school (cf. Street and Lefstein, 2007), yet can be linked to ecological literacy (Orr, 1992) and also raises questions about the limits of a definition of literacy as 'communication through visually decoded inscriptions' (Orr, 1992, p. 56). Furthermore, there is the sometimes stated dichotomy between print literacy and oracy, a separation set out in Table 2 above. The features (in this table) are subscribed to, for the purposes of this paper, as the focus is on the language and literacy experiences of Penan at school. These can be seen as significant dimensions in their lack of progress in formal education. I would argue that this is particularly salient with respect to the following: linear thinking (taught in most schools, where literacy is nearly always oriented towards nationally prevailing social and cultural positions), versus holistic conceptualization; and individualization (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), a fundamental value of Penan society. Ong (1967, p. 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.

In literacy, language may be isolated such that print text has an independence of meaning divorcing it from the experiences of children from backgrounds where print literacy has not developed, making text the object rather than a vehicle for analysis such that literacy is itself a function, rather than a conduit for learning.

Penan children in the primary school use their first language as an exclusive code 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 SM. The ease with which Penan children move seamlessly between languages appears to develop early on, orally at least. Among members of the kindergarten group the medium of interaction between two Dusun, one Iban and two Penan children is Iban. All the kindergarten children unashamedly use Iban with everyone else in the school (pupils and staff alike), despite frequently being told to speak Malay. This class cannot be assigned a teacher from the coast, since none 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 and, subsequently, English. Gupta (1997) argues in favor 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, there appear to be few advantages judging from Penan educational experiences to date. Penan language and cultural practices are often stigmatized, while there is a lack of sufficient access to Malay (let alone English), such that many Penan have gained little from an education based on languages that are relatively absent from their lives outside the classroom.[13]

Over half a century ago, UNESCO (1953, p. 11) suggested

> It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful

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

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, p. 2) has proposed 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; Schooling, 1990). In addition, Cummins' (1986, p. 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, a myth remains that in multilingual contexts it is too costly to provide resources and prepare teachers in several languages (Tucker, 1998, p. 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 introduced and supposedly taught through English. In primary four, in Sukang, there are seven pupils, including three Penan, who speak in whispers to each other (in Penan) while sitting at the back of the class, removed from the hub of activities, having few dealings with the other children in the classroom (cf. Bain and Yu, 2000, p. 1405).[14]

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 lower primary classes, while at upper primary levels, there appears greater self-consciousness, and reluctance, regarding the use of Penan. There also appears to develop a greater awareness of difference among older children, reflected in the reduced inter-ethnic contact between older pupils, especially between Penan and the Dusun and Iban children.

6. 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. Many of the challenges of the bilingual education system in Brunei (cf. Martin, 2008) appear 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
- a lack of resources for fostering academic development, including teachers from other areas who appear to resent their posting to Sukang
- material poverty (among the Penan)
- an insufficient sense of the value among Penan parents of the value of formal education, in that they do not expect educational success based on past experience, nor do they foster individual academic ambition in the same way as do parents of children from other local ethnolinguistic groups
- a contrast between the formal stratified and disciplined environment of the school compared to the informal, egalitarian environment of Penan homes
- Penan children's behavior and learning strategies seem to be at odds with expectations of primary school teachers in Sukang (cf. Heath, 1983)
- teachers and members of neighboring groups hold impressions of the Penan which reflect expectations and realizations of Penan pupils' performances in the local school
- only Penan speak Penan and no teachers or members of neighboring 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

In sum, Penan are not currently reaping much benefit from their formal education. Cummins (2000, p. 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.

However, on the positive side, many Penan children attend the first three years of school in Sukang, even if irregularly, a period during which subjects are taught in the medium of Malay, including English (largely) when some Penan do acquire basic text literacy skills, and gain basic monoliteracy in Malay.

Still, the situation need not be as poor as summarized in the bullet points above. For example, Larson et al. (1980) describe successes in bilingual education for the Aguaruna in a relatively remote part of the Peruvian rainforest, using both pupils' first language and Spanish. This appears to have been achieved largely as a result of involving local residents in decision-making, and actively encouraging them to contribute towards the establishment and maintenance of village schools that are attended by Aguaruna Indian children. However, Penan do not so far have the opportunity to contribute actively to their school in these kinds of ways.

It is recommended that in the best interests of the Penan, as well as in terms of cost benefit returns (for the state), Penan be initiated into the formal world of state-provided education through their first language to the point of basic text literacy, i.e., until they are able to read printed matter, with fluency. There may be sound reasons for introducing Penan children 'to educational programs in their first language' (Tucker, 1998, p. 10), as well as exposing them to school target languages (especially Malay), as naturally as possible and in greater quantities, than at present. Certainly, this need not be impractical (in terms of cost or achievability) for children at kindergarten level. Older children and parents could be recruited to help produce basic sets of materials to this end; and this might be facilitated more easily where Penan are text literate. Advantages would include: a sense of participation in the educational process, including official and explicit recognition of Penan as a language and the Penan community (cf. Jakway, 1981; Klaus, 2003; Romaine, 2009), as well as motivating Penan children academically. This might also reduce the chances of Penan's evanescence, allowing the language institutional functions, beyond informal intra-ethnic communication.

However, given Penan is unlikely to be introduced into Brunei's educational curriculum (as only SM and English are currently endorsed as media of educational instruction), focus might be given to making Malay more available throughout Sukang Village, as a language of wide currency and one that is significant in the broader language ecology of Borneo. Furthermore, Penan adults

[14] 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 100 words after four years of formal exposure to English.

might be provided classes in Malay literacy; a television and satellite dish might be placed in the village to allow school children and other local residents access to educational and entertainment programs in Malay, widely available in coastal areas; relatively cheap national newspapers (such as *Media Permata* or *Pelita Brunei*) might be delivered by boat with the twice-weekly food supplies; and the school's library might occasionally be left unlocked, allowing children access to its resources.

Furthermore, some form of orientation could be offered, including visits to remote areas, introducing trainee teachers to people(s) and areas in which they will be expected to work. The cumulative effects would be likely to benefit not only the Penan but the national government in terms of its monetary outlay and the development of local human resource potential. 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 interaction with Penan parents, if there is to be improvement in Penan children's school attendance rates, as well as raising their levels of academic success.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the insightful comments and suggestions provided by two anonymous reviewers. Any inaccuracies remain the responsibility of the author.

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