



MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND NATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG RUNGUS IN SABAH, MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

Native Language learning is a complex and remarkable achievement because the process generally emerges from unique interactions that distributed across social networks and is embodied in individuals. Accordingly, scholars portray the need of a specific approach in native language learning. Among the native learning approach identified is the 'experiential learning', an approach based on the idea of learning from experience as the path to lifelong learning and development. Scholars who is a fan of the learning approach argues that providing the learners an opportunity to learn through experience thus become immensely valuable. Some even specifically suggest that musical instruments can be used as a promising experience based instructional instrument in language learning. But how exactly the musical instruments affect native language learning process? Through the application of a mixed-method approach, this paper examines the relationship between musical instruments and the native language learning via the lens of Rungus in Sabah, Malaysia. It shows that the musical instruments affect the native language learning among Rungus in Sabah, Malaysia. What this now hinted is that the musical instruments are an important part of a successful native language learning process, thus made it clear the need among instructors to consider musical instruments as part of their teaching activities.

Keywords:

Language; Musical Instruments; Rungus; Sabah

Introduction

Researchers such as Kim (2020), Muhammad Saber and Rahim (2016), Nelson (2011), and Robinson (2008) generally portrays that language learning is the most complex and remarkable achievement. In this regard, Nelson (2011) specifically argued that language learning is a process which often linked with complexity as it emerges from unique interactions that distributed across social networks and is embodied in individuals. The process began since infant and continued throughout the states of human development. As Muhammad Saber and Rahim (2016) argue, *“at birth, infants exhibit a listening bias for affectively positive vocalizations, whether speech or music, which facilitates learning in these domains. Later in the developmental process, skill at discriminating, remembering, and producing sound patterns such as the intonation patterns of speech or the melodies of music are acquired”*. What this now hinted is that the successful or effective learning process required specific approach as it is vital to ensure the learners continuously improving themselves in language skill and ability.

Among the learning approach is an ‘experiential learning’ approach which described by Passarelli and Kolb (2012) described as a learning from experience as the path to lifelong learning and development. As the name suggest, this learning approach stressed the need for experience in the learning process. Accordingly, Kim (2020) suggests that it is vital to help learners participate in ways of life along the process of teaching language. He stressed that such move must goes beyond knowledge of subject matter, and it goes beyond any simple type of well-being. The reason is that language learning can immerse learners in others’ worlds, and that it fosters empathy and understanding across sociopolitical differences. Nevertheless, such an effort would only work when the learning activities based largely on pedagogy with an adequate account of language and culture.

Despite the importance of other instruments for pedagogy or the method of how teachers teach, it is argued that musical instruments offer many advantages for learning languages. Scientists such as Brandt, Gebrian and Slevc (2012), and Koelsch (2011), often stressed that playing musical instruments as well as listening to a song and humming along helps with language learning. In many cases, scientists argue that playing musical instruments also helps to establish a calm environment for learners to focus and relax while organizing their thoughts as well as choosing words. Moreover, playing musical instruments and at the same time listening to a song will assist learners in expanding vocabulary and learning synonyms. Based on this minimal information about the relationship between musical instrument and language learning, one must wonder whether the musical instruments really help in language learning. Therefore, a study must be conducted to understand the relationship between musical instrument and language learning.

Native language learning in Sabah, and specifically the Rungus language learning is an interesting case for studying these relationships. The growing of interest among the Rungus in native language learning as well as the tendency among the teenagers to play musical

instruments justifies such a decision. Hence, the principal research question of the study which this paper is based is to what extent the musical instruments affect the native language learning among the Rungus in Sabah of Malaysia? Accordingly, the principal objective of the study which this paper is based is to examine the relationship between musical instruments and the native language learning among the Rungus in Sabah of Malaysia.

The Study on Musical Instruments and Native Language Learning Relationship

To understand what exactly the impact of musical instrument towards native language learning process among the Rungus in Sabah of Malaysia is, the exploratory study which the paper is based applies a mixed method approach through the examination of information gathered from various sources such as survey questionnaires, interview with selected respondents, books, journals, media reports, and historical documents. Hanson, Creswell, Planno, Petska and Creswell (2005) stressed that the mixed method approach involves collection, analysis, and integration of qualitative and quantitative data in a single or multiphase study. Therefore, utilizing such an approach gives the researcher better advantages as it provide opportunity to build on the synergy and strengths that exist between both quantitative and qualitative approach, thus, Gay and Peter (2003) argued that it made the researcher understand a phenomenon more fully than is possible using either quantitative or qualitative alone. After all, the data gathered were administered and analyzed using relevant quantitative and qualitative techniques that are Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and interpretation of data by the researcher. While the use of SPSS aims at reporting the quantitative data gathered through the survey questionnaire that are easy to use and present (Gogoi, 2020), the qualitative data gathered through qualitative technique aims at focusing on the meaning and the process of making meaning (Willig, 2014). Willig (2014) describes the technique is based on the idea that the qualitative data never speaks for itself, thus it need to be given meaning by the researcher.

Accordingly, as to ensure that the obtained information through quantitative and qualitative approach represents the issues being studied or to ensure the construct validity of the information, all documents as well as the data gathered through survey questionnaire and interview with selected respondents were verified by the third parties as accurate sources. Such move generally vital as it aims at detecting and correcting errors and inconsistencies in the data collected so that the information be cleaned to pass consistency and validation, a procedure that involve the removal of unverified data (Olteanu, et. al., 11 July 2019; Rahm, et. al., 2000). Information or data cleaning is especially essential when dealing with information from multi-sources (Ationg, et. al., 2020; Ationg, et. al., 2018; Rahman, et. al., 2017; Ationg, 2001), in which it involves identifying and thereafter overlapping information or to match the records referring to the same real-world entity as well as substitution of incomplete data. This helps diminishes any orderly bias insights about the topic being conversed. This orderly bias might encompass the investigators own judgement toward the issue being studied. Thus, it is imperative to note that for the sake of ensuring the validity of the information gained, as demanded by many researchers such as Kapoor, Tamilmani, Rana, Patil, Dwivedi and Nerur (2018), and Ationg (2020), only the reliable information from several sources that are related with this paper. The reliable sources of information in this study denotes to sources that are more consistent than others which were free from the portion of bias towards other parties.

Moreover, given the importance of validity and reliability of a research instrument, the survey questionnaire had also been tested prior to data collection. In the context of quantitative approach, the concept of validity generally described as the extent to which the test statements allow precise conclusion about the topic being studied (Siti Haslinda, 2009; Chua, 2006; Hughes, 1989). The validity test found to be relevant for survey questionnaire of this study is the face and content validity, a test where validity was measured through assistance from the experts on musical instrument and native language learning. teaching and who are familiar with the youth activities. Thus, input regarding valid or/and invalid questions was given by them. The researcher, then, constructed the survey questionnaire based on the inputs given. Meanwhile, reliability of the survey questionnaire was measured by using Cronbach's Alpha, the most used amongst social scientists (DeCoster, 2000; Coakes & Steed, 2000). The reliability of the survey instrument was decided based on Lamprianou and Athanasou (2009) argument that value of 0.5 to 0.6 shows the research instrument has a moderate level of reliability coefficient, and a value of 0.7 to 0.8 shows a high level of reliability coefficient. Therefore, it appeared that the survey questionnaire is a valid and reliable instrument as the total value of reliability coefficient obtained is 0.876. Thus, a total of 150 respondents were chosen using purposive sampling technique to answer the survey questionnaire which distributed by the researcher(s) personally. As mentioned, the obtained answered survey questionnaire then was analysed using SPSS.

Findings

The secondary information gathered through books, journal, media reports and historical documents confirms that the people of Rungus are the native people who can be found in the northeast corner of Sabah, Malaysian Borneo (Rongguan, 2017; Azizi, et. al., 2015). This native community generally identify themselves, their customs, and their dialect group (isoglot) by the autonym Rungus. For this reason, Hermon (2020) suggest that the Rungus people are the most traditional ethnic group in Sabah. In explaining such an argument, he stressed that the Rungus people remain remarkably strong in keeping up their traditional culture. He said, "their life, as that of most tribes in Borneo, turns around rice: the preparing of the paddy field, or the clearance of a hill plot, the growing of rice and looking after it, and finally the harvest. Large coconut and banana groves enable the Rungus to get cash, but in all, their traditional life-style suits them very much and seems to keep them out of trouble and stress". Nevertheless, researchers such as Ationg, Totu, Ling, Tibok and Gansau (2020), Ationg, Totu, Pudim and Majumah (2018), Majumah (2015), and Appell (1968) generally portrays that the use of mother tongue among the Rungus community in Sabah, Malaysia is increasingly unpopular. This is especially true among the new generation of this native community. They even suggest that such a development is the result of modernization process which inadvertently made the Rungus no longer interested in the maintenance of their own mother tongue, thus deviates from their own traditions. This made it clear that the idea put forwarded by Burch, Rickson and Annels (1992), Cancian (1960), Carleheden and Jacobson (2001), and Sallabank (2010) on the significance of modernization process in the weakening of the native culture is acceptable. Despite that, however, the key element of the modernization process namely science and technology, particularly the presence of musical instruments (Baumann, 2000) is also can be used systematically to ensure the maintenance of the native traditions through language learning activity.

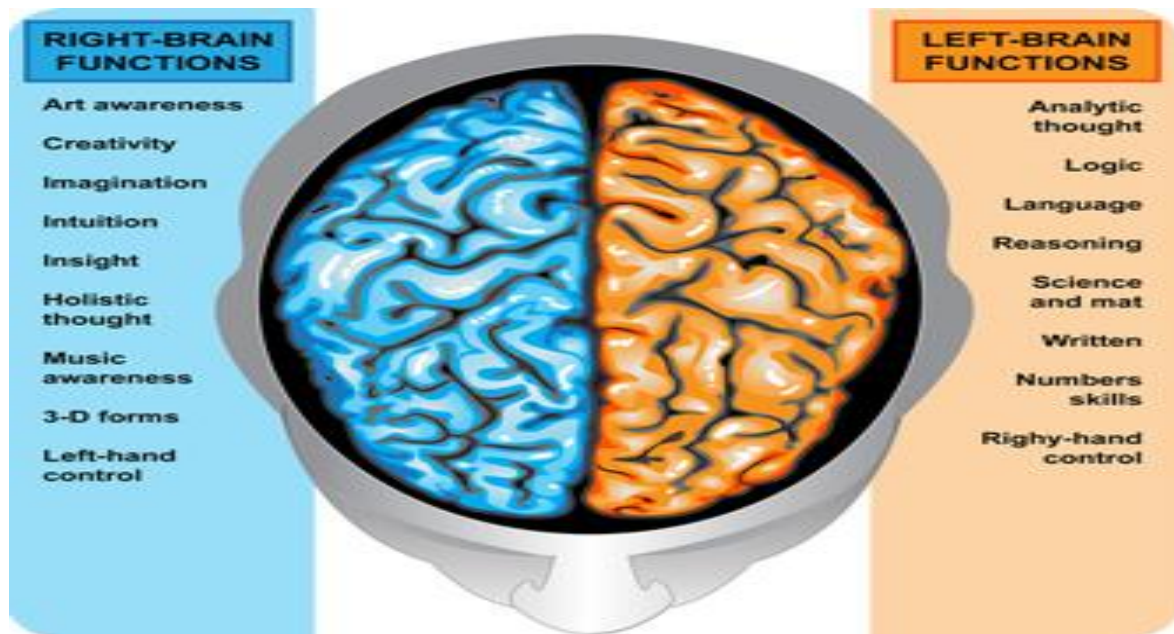
Before explaining the significance of musical instruments in Rungus language learning, however, it is essential to understand what exactly the definition of musical instruments and the musical instruments is commonly used by this native community. In general, the concept of musical instruments refers to any device for producing a musical sound and that the principal types of such instruments, classified by the method of producing sound, are percussion, stringed, keyboard, wind, and electronic (Westrup & Grame, 27 November 2020). In the Rungus community these types of instruments categorized into two grouping namely modern and traditional musical instruments. Both categories often played by not only the teenagers but also the elders of the community. The modern musical instruments comprise of electric guitar, non-electric guitar, keyboard, piano, drums, violin, saxophone, flute, and clarinet. The traditional musical instruments which generally played during cultural ceremonies such as *kaamatan* (harvest festival), *mogontong* (weeding), *magahau* (thanksgiving), *moginakan* (feasting), *monguykas* and *lumukas* (funeral), includes *Tagung* (percussion instrument that takes the form of a flat, circular metal disc which is hit with a mallet. This includes *Tavag*, *Koritikon*, *Sandangau*, *Pompo* and *Soludon*), *Sundatang* (a guitar with two strings), *Turali* (noseflute), *Turuding* (noseflute), *Sompoton* (mouth organ), *Kungkuvak* (a flute made of rice stalks), and *Tongkungan* (musical instrument made of bamboo).

These musical instruments not only help the Rungus to better define and understand their own culture, but most importantly they contributed to language learning because the music generated by the instruments plays a key role in language acquisition. This certainly hinted that musical instruments must be used to ensure the learners, particularly the early learners or the children, boost their language learning. In fact, the neuroscience studies as Muhammad Saber and Rahim (2016) explained stressed that music be able to enhance brain function in children. Therefore, playing any kind of musical instrument as well as singing and listening to music stimulate the learner's brain, and thus lead to the improvement of brain structure with the formation of new neural connections. As a result, the learners become one who is good in language and reasoning. The Government of Australia (17 April 2020) stressed that young children who participate in music classes as well as those who play music will usually be more improved with their speech development and learn to read more easily. This is because, when they learn music their left brain which associated with language and learning (see Figure 1) is developed. The music also helps the learners to not only recognize but also memorize the information relating to the song.

Therefore, in the case of Rungus language learning, information gathered through interview with selected respondents reveal that the children who interested in playing musical instruments actively often become one that can speak Rungus very well regardless of their gender, residence (whether in town or in rural areas), family economic status, religion, and other social backgrounds. The field investigation in the Daerah Kecil Matunggong of Sabah between February and May 2021 clarified such a view. A total of 20 children aged between 7 and 16 were invited to participate in the study voluntarily. Of the total, 10 respondents were active in playing musical instruments and the remaining were never play any musical instruments. When asked in Rungus, all respondents who plays musical instruments were able to understand and speak the language fluently. Nevertheless, majority of the respondents who never play musical instruments (6 persons) were also able to understand and speaks Rungus, but not as good as those who regularly play musical instruments. Some of the respondents who actively play musical instrument even has the capability of explaining

specific issues using Rungus language very well. On the contrary, however, some respondents who never play musical instrument tend to speak Malay, rather than Rungus.

Figure 1: Brain Based Learning



Source: Instit2te of NLP for Public Service

The respondents, however, generally in agreement with the opinion that playing musical instruments helps them in learning to speaks their own mother tongue very well. One of those respondents who was interviewed in this study noted that, *“playing musical instruments help me to understand many Rungus words. This is especially true when we played the instruments such as guitar and traditional musical instruments to sing the Rungus song. Singing the traditional song is especially effective in not only recognizing but also understanding how to use some Rungus word correctly”* (interview with the respondent at her age of 15 years old in Matunggong, Sabah). In a similar vein, other respondents who was interviewed stressed that: *“learning the right way of speaking Rungus is interesting when we know how to play musical instrument”* (interview with the respondent at his age of 13 years old in Matunggong, Sabah).

On the contrary, the respondent who never play musical instrument admitted that he still struggling to learn how to speak Rungus fluently. He said, *“I am still learning how to speak Rungus because it is not easy to memorize the Rungus words. In fact, me and my family communicate in Malay rather than Rungus. I may be able to learn more about the Rungus words if I get actively involved in playing musical instruments with friends because there will be a communication in Rungus”* (interview with a respondent at his age of 16 years old in Matunggong, Sabah). Though it is not necessarily true that communication with friends is taking place when they play musical instrument, this portrays that musical instrument provides support in Rungus language learning activity.

Information gathered through survey questionnaire also prevails a significant relationship between musical instruments and native language learning. A total of 150 respondents were asked to provide their response by filling in the survey questionnaire. Of these respondents, Table 1 shows that 78 individuals were male (52.00%) and that 72 individuals were female (48.00%); 121 were aged between 20 and below (80.67%) and 39 were aged between 21 and above (19.33%); 99 were attained primary school (66.00%), 43 were attained secondary school (28.67%), and 8 were attained university or college (5.33%).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78
	Female	72
Age	20 years and below	121
	21 years and above	21
Education Attainment	Primary School	99
	Secondary School	43
	College/University	8

$n = 121$

When the responses provided by the respondents were analyzed, it reveals that musical instruments are significant in the native learning process. The respondents perceived that the younger generations of Rungus in Matunggong, Sabah be able to learn their native language successfully when the instructor uses musical instruments as part of their teaching and learning activities. Such perceptions are reflected in the result of data analysis on the correlation coefficient between the native language learning process and musical instruments showcased in Table 2. The analysis shows that the correlation coefficient between native language learning and musical instruments is positive and significant ($r = 0.651$). This certainly suggest the significant of musical instruments in native language learning process.

Table 2: Correlation between Musical Instruments and Native Language Learning

Variables	Native Language Learning		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation Coefficient (r)
Musical Instruments	65	17.5	0.651

*The study considers r value of more than 0.300 as an acceptable value for strong relations between two factors/variables.

Given the significance of musical instruments in language learning process, it is argued that integrating Rungus language learning activities with musical instruments become immensely valuable. All parties and specifically all the instructors, local leaders, parents and whoever feels obligated to ensure the maintenance of Rungus language in this land, by now, need to consider musical instruments as part of the native language teaching and learning activities. This is especially true given that scholars such as Fiske (1993), Gervain and Mehler (2010), Wurmke and Mende (2009), and Jackendoff (2006) stressed that musical education plays an imperative role in the development of children's native language ability as it contributes to the development of grammar, colloquialism, and vocabulary. In fact, a recent study found that when a child at the age of nine and younger were educated music for only one hour a week, they marvelously demonstrated greater ability speak using a language considered new to them. Fiske (1993) even portray that there appears to be some sort of symbiotic relationship between the fundamentals and the mental processing of language and music at the synthetic level. Moreover, a study by Gervain and Mehler (2010) indicates that the children who listen to musical instruments tend become one who improved grammatically and vocabulary. Another study by Wurmke and Mende (2009) also in agreement with an idea that musical instruments play significant role in language learning when they found that children who study music by 7 years old generally develop larger vocabulary, grammatical emotions, and higher shoes. Local researchers, Mohamad Azam and Kamariah (2018) further explained that music and songs or nursery rhymes are one of the methods which can be used in teaching and learning of pre-schools. They stressed that the reason is that both music and songs significantly help increase children's development in many aspects such as language ability. They also opined that music and songs also be able to inculcate positive attitudes among the children or the early learner. Jackendoff (2006), thus, make it clear that children learn their mother tongue according to the principles of meaning in terms of sound information; therefore, it seems reasonable to approach second language acquisition in a similar way. Hence, given that music is also acquired through the senses, musical activities are suggested as an aid in the acquisition of native language among the children. Therefore, in this modern era, where native language learning is being prioritized by many for the survival of their traditional language, making use of musical instruments for such an objective is immensely valuable. This is especially true in the case of Rungus, the native people of Sabah in Malaysia where the native language is declining (Ationg, Totu, Pudim & Majumah, 2018; Borneo Today, 20 June 2020).

Conclusion

The paper presents a discussion on the relationship between musical instruments and the native language learning among the Rungus in Sabah, Malaysia. It appeared that musical instruments play important role in the native language learning among Rungus in Sabah, Malaysia. This portrays musical instruments as an important part of a successful native language learning process. For this reason, it is argued that all parties who are relevance to the native language learning activities, by now, need to consider musical instruments as part of their teaching activities. To do so, they are required to ensure the musical instrument be used for providing the learners an opportunity in understanding the importance of such instruments in everyday life as well as in native culture. The process, however, must begin from the early development of the learners because language acquisition starts at this age, and most importantly, musical instrument can help boost language learning when they are exposed to it earlier.

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