

# Challenges in Implementing Multiple Intelligences in the Teaching of English to Orang Asli Students in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

The Multiple Intelligences (MI) recognises an individual's differences and proposes that the learning process should be tailored to one's strengths in his/her multiple intelligences. This approach seems promising to address the learning problems faced by the Orang Asli students in the mainstream education in Malaysia as they possess different types of intelligence due to their inherited traits and cultural environments, which have been cited as potential reasons for their low performance compared to their non-indigenous peers. Despite the potential of MI in education, studies that look into the implementation of MI for the Orang Asli students in Malaysia, particularly in ESL learning, have been scanty. Thus, this study aimed to identify the integration of MI employed by teachers, and uncover the problems encountered during the process so that strategies can be drawn for more effective implementation in the classroom for these students. This research employs a qualitative case study design with in-depth interview as the data collection method. The homogenous sampling technique involving five teachers was applied. The interview data was later transcribed, coded, and analysed in Atlas Ti using a thematic analysis technique. The findings show that teachers who integrate multiple intelligences of their students can make a significant contribution to shaping the students' character and potential and that the intelligence and abilities possessed by students will be able to solve problems and create something of value from their cultural background and surrounding environment. The study offers paramount information on the challenges of MI implementation in the teaching of ESL among Orang Asli primary school students and helps direct ways to improve it and provides more direction for more detailed further research into the area.

**Keywords:** Multiple Intelligences, Orang Asli, ESL Learning, Indigenous, Challenges

## INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that the landscape of education is very diverse with students coming from various backgrounds, each having unique intelligences and learning preferences and styles. Understanding and catering to these different backgrounds and intelligences are, thus, imperative for effective teaching and learning. The Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory has emphasised the importance of identifying and nurturing intelligences that students exhibit. Empirical studies have commended the significant implications of the MI approach in education, especially in enhancing student engagement that could lead to their achievement (Winarti, Yuanita and Nur, 2019; Ahamad, Samsudin, Ismail, and Ahmad, 2021; Fadilloh, Rustaman and Sanjaya, 2021; Green, 2021; Irgang dos Santos, Könzgen Huck, De Miranda and Da Silveira, 2022; Gunawan and Shieh, 2023).

The MI theory, introduced by Howard Gardner (1983), puts forward that intelligence cannot be seen as a single entity, rather it consists of eight distinct types of linguistic-verbal, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetics, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic intelligences. Gardner later proposes the ninth intelligence as an addition to the original theory, i.e. existential intelligence which is described as an ability to see a bigger picture of life and explore deeper questions about existence. Gardner's MI theory also suggests that each student may possess one or more intelligences that may be acquired through inherited traits and environmental experiences. Some intelligences may be more dominant than others in an individual learner and this will influence his or her interests, motivation and approaches to learning. Thus, integrating MI into educational practices can help cater to students' learning experiences based on their strengths. This, in turn, can foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

In Malaysia, the indigenous students, locally called 'Orang Asli' (directly translated as Original People) follow the mainstream educational system. Coming from various ethnic groups, these students often exhibit different types of intelligence compared to their non-indigenous peers due to their inherited traits and distinct cultural environments. These differences may have contributed to their low academic performance compared to the mainstream students. Reports have shown that although the academic performance of the Orang Asli group has improved, it is still below the national level average and lags behind that of their non-indigenous counterparts (Department of Orang Asli (JAKOA), 2008; 2011; 2017; Ministry of Education, 2012; 2017; Sawalludin, Jia Min and Mohd Ishar, 2020; Othman, 2022). The reports also cited cultural differences and lack of resources that can address their specific learning needs as the reasons for the student's performance. Since the Orang Asli group brings with them unique and different cultural experiences compared to their peers, a standard common teaching and learning approach in the classroom may not benefit them. As MI celebrates the differences in intelligence among individuals, it offers a promising approach to address this disparity by nurturing the varied intelligence among the students. Incorporating the MI framework in learning can provide a more supportive and engaging learning experience for them as teachers can tailor learning experiences to individual strengths.

However, despite the potential of MI in education, studies that investigate the implementation of MI for the Orang Asli students in Malaysia, particularly in ESL learning, have been scanty. This highlights the need to explore how MI can be effectively integrated into the teaching practices in the classroom. It is essential to identify the common activities that include the integration of MI employed by teachers, and uncover the problems encountered during the process so that multiple intelligences can be effectively implemented in the classroom.

The present study aims to address the gap by examining the challenges in implementing MI in the ESL learning process for the Orang Asli students in Malaysia. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the problems in implementing Multiple Intelligences in ESL learning for the Orang Asli students?
2. What are the common activities employed by teachers in integrating Multiple Intelligences in ESL learning for the Orang Asli students?
3. What are the challenges students face in a multiple intelligence setting?

By addressing these questions, it is hoped that the study can provide insights into the challenges of implementing MI in the teaching of English to Orang Asli students in Malaysia. It is also expected that from the objective data and findings, some practical recommendations can be offered to contribute to the student's academic success and personal development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Multiple Intelligence theory was developed in 1983 by Gardner. He postulated that all human beings have varying degrees of types of intelligence that can be enhanced when conducive environments, practices, and

training are provided. He proposed that intelligence is not a singular, fixed entity, but rather a set of multiple intelligences, each with its own unique qualities and capabilities.

The eight constructs of MI classified by Gardner (1983) are: i) linguistic intelligence involves sensitivity to spoken and written language, as well as the ability to use language to accomplish certain goals; ii) logical-mathematical intelligence which refers to the ability to think logically, solve mathematical problems, and understand complex systems; iii) spatial intelligence that is concerned with the ability to visualise and manipulate the surroundings to solve problems or make adjustments; iv) interpersonal intelligence that describes the capacity to comprehend and interact with people efficiently. Individuals with this intelligence are skilled in identifying and responding to other people's emotions, wants and motivations; v) intrapersonal intelligence involves understanding oneself, one's feelings, motives and objectives. Intrapersonal intelligent people are reflective and capable of self-examination; vi) bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence which is associated with the ability to move and manipulate the body to express ideas and engage in physical activities; viii) naturalist intelligence which describe individuals who are sensitive to and appreciative of the natural environment such as plants, animals and the earth; and viii) musical intelligence which refers to the ability to appreciate, create or compose and perform music. This involves a sensitivity to rhythm, pitch, melody and tone. Musically intelligent individuals may excel in areas such as playing instruments, composing music or recognising patterns in sound.

Gardner's theory has had a significant impact on education as it highlights the importance of recognising and nurturing students' diverse talents and strengths. Implementing multiple intelligences theory in the classroom involves a range of strategies and approaches supported by research and educational practice. Some key strategies include varied instructional methods and flexible grouping, where teachers incorporate a diverse range of teaching methods to cater to different intelligences. For example, use visual aids, hands-on activities, group discussions and music-based learning (Armstrong, 2009). This approach allows students to work in different group configurations based on their strengths and preferences, thus promoting collaboration and peer learning (Tomlinson and Allan, 2000). Concerning assessments, teachers can offer assessments that tap into different intelligences, such as projects, presentations, or written assignments, and this promotes personalised learning as teachers provide opportunities for students to pursue topics of interest and develop their unique talents (Gregory and Chapman, 2007). To foster a supportive and inclusive classroom culture where all intelligences are valued, teachers can imply an inclusive classroom environment and teacher modelling where teachers demonstrate how to approach tasks using different intelligences to inspire students (Gardner, 2006). These strategies, supported by research and educational literature, can help create a more inclusive and effective learning environment that caters to the diverse strengths and preferences of students.

Incorporating multiple intelligences theory into ESL/EFL classrooms has been a topic of research interest. Akkuzu and Akçay (2011) investigated the effectiveness of MI theory on the achievement, attitudes and retention of students based on a designated MI learning environment. In their study, different activities and techniques were used to enhance students' learning achievement, and the results indicate that MI theory has a positive influence on students' achievements, and they were more positively motivated in the classroom. Similarly, Pratiwi, Rochintaniawati, and Agustin (2018), in their research, discovered that there was a positive relationship between the MI-based learning approach and students' concepts, mastery and interest in learning. In a similar vein, Rostami and Soleimani (2015) investigated the relationship between students' multiple intelligences and their essay-writing performance across different genres. They discovered that there was a strong and positive correlation between the multiple intelligences and their writing abilities for the different types of essays. Finally, Madkour and Mohamed's (2016) research on students' motivation and language proficiency suggests that when students became aware of their multiple intelligences' profiles, they were able to increase their motivation, and as a result, their language abilities improved. These studies offer valuable insights into the application of multiple intelligences theory in ESL/EFL contexts, providing educators with practical strategies to create more inclusive and effective language learning environments.

Studies on the challenges of implementing MI for indigenous students are relatively sparse, but several studies address some related themes. Shofiana (2019) investigated the implementation of MI and its challenges in one

of the schools located in the Central Java province, Indonesia. In her study, she found a few difficulties in implementing MI which includes the heterogeneous character of students which forces teachers to continuously adapt and prepare a variety of medias in teaching. Besides, the infrastructure of the school can be a barrier to the implementation of MI too because the school does not have suitable facilities to assist their teaching and learning process and has affected students' motivation and the atmosphere in the classroom (Sukeemok, 2014). Dealing with students' psychological condition which affect their behaviour is another challenge in implementing MI (Widyasari, 2021).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This research employed qualitative case study design with in-depth interview as the data collection method. Case study design was employed due to the focus of this research which is to explore in-depth on a specific phenomenon in Orang Asli English language education at primary school setting. The specific phenomenon is the English language teachers' challenges in implementing Multiple Intelligences teaching strategy in the classroom at selected K9 primary schools in Malaysia. K9 schools are comprehensive special model boarding schools that provide primary and lower secondary education to Orang Asli students. Ethics approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee was obtained prior to the data collection (Ref: REC/08/2022 (FB/39)).

### **Sampling**

Homogenous sampling technique was applied in this research. Homogenous sampling is a purposive sampling technique whereby researchers select participants who share specific characteristics or traits, which not only ensuring a uniformity within the target sample, but also enabling for deeper and rich insights collected from the target sample. The sample comprised of five English language teachers who currently teach in five different K9 primary schools in Malaysia. Hence, these teachers were the sole representative from their respective K9 schools that participated in the in-depth interview session with the researchers. Only five K9 schools was involved in this research due to the limited permission given by the Ministry of Education to the research team to enter selected K9 schools. The five teachers fulfilled similar criteria of graduating from Teacher Education Institute (IPG), having taught English language in Orang Asli primary schools for minimum of five years, and had been teaching upper primary Orang Asli students for the past two years.

### **Instrumentation**

A four-section semi-structured interview protocol was utilised during in-depth interview session. The interview protocol was constructed by the researchers based on the past literature to probe on the issues faced by the teachers in conducting effective multiple intelligence instruction during ESL lessons. Based on the protocol, the teachers were first asked to share about their educational backgrounds and teaching experience. Next, in the second and third section of the interview, they were asked about the ongoing, specific instruction problems that they are dealing with Orang Asli ESL primary school students and their efforts in integrating multiple intelligence in the classroom activities respectively. Meanwhile, in the final section of the interview, the teachers were asked to not only further elaborate on the students' obstacles that hinder effective implementation of multiple intelligence instruction, but also state real-life examples of the situations.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Five face-to-face in-depth interview sessions were conducted during data collection process. Before conducting the interview, each interview participant was given a briefing about the confidentiality of the data collected. Each interview session lasted for around 40 minutes and the audio of the interview was recorded via mobile phone. The interview data was later transcribed, coded and analysed in Atlas Ti software using thematic analysis technique.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Implementing MI theory in teaching English to Orang Asli students in Malaysia can be challenging due to several factors. One of the main factors is the diverse cultural backgrounds of the Orang Asli students may not support the conventional MI approaches and this can lead to misunderstandings or mismatches in teaching strategies (Thompson & Chen, 2020). Additionally, the Orang Asli students may face language barriers that complicate the implementation of MI strategies, especially in verbal communication (Mohamad & Husin, 2021). Furthermore, the existing curriculum may not provide enough flexibility to integrate the MI approaches fully and this makes it difficult for the teachers to differentiate learning experiences (Tomlinson, 2001). Another factor can be the assessing of the different intelligences which can be complex and the traditional assessment methods may not effectively evaluate the various strengths of the Orang Asli students (Hamid & Yaakob, 2022).

The following sections report the findings from the data analysed based on the research questions.

### **Problems in implementing Multiple Intelligences in ESL learning for the Orang Asli students**

The first major problem faced by the teachers in implementing MI in the classroom is the limitation of teaching resources. The standard teaching resources for ESL subjects in Malaysia are prescribed by the Ministry of Education. This is to ensure that all students received the same standard of learning. However, schools serving Orang Asli communities often face limitations in resources and this includes teaching materials and trained teachers who are familiar with MI theory (Ariffin & Hoon, 2019). Furthermore, the teachers interviewed expressed that students find the resources, especially reading, difficult as they do not understand the vocabulary used in the textbooks. The teachers claimed that they have to go through the reading passages at least three times and explained the meanings of the words before the students can read and understand the passages. This means that the readability level of the passages is not suitable for the students' level of competence in the English language. This is in line with other studies that discovered the main factors causing reading anxiety for indigenous students were to be a result of material characteristics, particularly the use of unfamiliar words (Aisyah, 2017; Muhlis, 2017; Faruq, 2019).

In addition, the teachers also claimed that they are not able to implement MI because the content of the teaching resources does not relate to the student's culture and schemata. Students are incapable of comprehending the passages from the textbooks that present topics on boarding schools in England or holiday cruises. Since the contents are not meaningful to the students, the teachers have problems to apply suitable MI for the contents in their teaching. This aligns with Takal, et al.'s (2021) study as they found that the contents of the passages do not cover or embed Malaysian society or culture and this made it challenging for the students to comprehend. Therefore, the teaching materials and textbooks must be evaluated to ensure good quality of teaching the English Language as English is taught as a second language (Ghazali, 2008, Momand, et al., 2024). Furthermore, the teachers stated that they lacked time to prepare materials for the students. At times, they take materials for their lessons from the Internet and adapt them to fit the students' level. Another teacher, Teacher B said that there are also students of varying abilities in the class and to implement MI to them is quite challenging. The students need complete guidance from their teachers. Zhao et al. (2021) stated that students had a low interest in learning English and only learned the language to cope with the results of the examination. Although the students are outdoors inclined, the teachers do not want to carry out their lessons outside of the classrooms because of the hot weather and they do not want the students to leave school and go home. Furthermore, nature is not included in the ESL curriculum per se, thus, instructors might not see the need to employ the strategies in the teaching and learning process. However, this is not in line with a study by Gul and Rafique (2017) who found that naturalistic intelligence was a highly preferred MI strategy employed by Pakistani teachers in ELT.

Based on pedagogical challenges, the teachers agreed that they lack the training to employ MI in the classroom. Many teachers may not have proper training in MI theory and how to apply it practically in class, making it difficult to create an engaging and effective learning environment that is tailored to the needs of the Orang

Asli students (Rahman & Zainal (2020). When they did their teaching practicum before graduating, they were sent to teach in schools in Kuala Lumpur and these schools did not have Orang Asli students. Therefore, they had no exposure to teaching Orang Asli students until they were posted to schools with only Orang Asli students. They employed the traditional method of teaching, using the chalk- and- talk method and later found out that this method did not work as the students did not understand and could not absorb what was being taught and had blank looks on their faces. As the students find learning English a great challenge, the teachers mentioned that they need to be bilingual most of the time while teaching. Therefore, they find that they cannot really apply MI in their teaching. However, the teachers need to be guided on how to incorporate MI in their teaching as MI can play an important role in shaping and moulding the students' interest by analysing their intelligence (Hairudin, et al., 2023). After gauging their multiple intelligences, the teachers can design their learning materials and activities accordingly. While MI aims to improve student engagement, maintaining motivation among diverse learners can still be a challenge, especially if the students themselves cannot relate to the materials (Smith & Brown, 2022).

### **Common activities employed by teachers in integrating Multiple Intelligences in ESL learning for the Orang Asli students**

The data indicate that the teachers employed several MI in their teaching to interest the students. They learned better when teaching and learning incorporated their preference learning styles (Jabari, 2020 & Isda, et al., 2016) like visuals, kinesthetic and working in groups. One of the teachers introduced songs in her lessons and she noticed that they concentrated and listened to the songs filled with joy. Most of the activities involved physical body movement as part of the learning process (Vaishnav, 2013). They would follow, sing along and dance to the music. Through these songs, the teachers introduced new vocabulary and explained the meanings of the words to them. To reinforce their understanding, the students were made to write simple sentences. The other four teachers agreed with Teacher A. They face the same problems with their students and think that learning will be better with resources like songs and music. This is in line with Zebari, et. al.'s (2018) study indicating that it will make it easy for teachers to choose the suitable types of activities and techniques for their lessons and the students will benefit from them. Additionally, the Orang Asli students' learning became more meaningful when the teacher also introduced storytelling to them. The teachers found that they could memorise better through reading aloud (Gilakjani, 2012). For audio resources, the teachers stated that they provided the students with worksheets, the students listened and they did matching exercises. The exercises differ for the different levels of MI. They were more successful in completing tasks if they worked in a team (Mat Salleh, et. al., 2019). The teachers found that the students also like visuals in their lessons. Furthermore, the teachers prepare their writing and reading materials that are suitable for their student's level of proficiency so they will be involved in the learning process and be interested in the language (Zaini, 2019). Thus, the teachers need to be patient and should provide teaching materials according to the students' intelligence as these would help them to develop their intelligence (Liu, 2022). Furthermore, by getting the students engaged in different types of activities that suit their intelligence, the learning process can be richer and beneficial (Hairudin, et. al., 2023).

### **Challenges students face in a multiple intelligence setting**

The students faced psychological challenges in an MI setting. This is related to their personality traits as the Orang Asli students are fearful of engaging with 'outside' educational methods and the paradigm shift from an oral, traditional non-formal education to the modern way of learning (Renganathan, 2018). In addition, the students found English a difficult language to learn as they speak their mother tongue, Jakun and Bahasa Malaysia. They needed extra support from the teachers to get them interested in learning the English Language as they find that English is difficult and they have a negative perception as it is the third language to them. Studies by Zheng (2021), Ishak et al., (2022) and Tian (2021) highlighted that one of the features that will help students improve their performance in the English Language is their interest in the English Language. Interest in the English language can be developed when students have a deep understanding when they are involved in learning activities. Significantly, once the interest has been developed, students can be excellent in English (Hairudin, et. al., 2023). The teachers in all the schools mentioned that the students perceive English

as an alien language as they do not have much exposure to the language. However, interest in the English language can be developed when they get involved in the classroom learning activities prepared by their teachers and slowly understand the language and what they have to do. Additionally, once they have gained and developed their interest, they can be good in the language (Maravilla, et al., 2020).

Along the same line, students' background knowledge and schemata also play vital roles in their learning process of the English language. The students will interpret what they know with what they learn in the classroom (Salmi, 2011). So teachers need to encourage students to use their MI in learning the English language to help them understand and use the language as well as develop their social skills (Hairudin, et. al., 2023).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study examined the problems faced by teachers in implementing MI in teaching and learning English using activities and the challenges that they had to endure. Based on the findings, teaching resources, pedagogical and psychological challenges were the main problems faced by both the teachers and students. Furthermore, students found learning English more interesting with the use of a variety of Orang Asli culturally-related-and-resonated activities and resources that integrates MI. Applying multiple intelligences here will help the students learn better and be able to manage their learning and overcome their challenges in learning the language (Serin, Yavuz & Muhammedzade, 2009). Additionally, when teachers centre the lessons on the students' needs, it enhances learning for the whole class collaboratively. Teachers who teach towards multiple intelligences realise the benefits such as active learners and successful students (Neeraj & Kumar, 2017). In short, MI offers a platform for the analysis of student intelligence; thereon, assists teachers in designing relevant learning materials and activities. With the integration of MI embedded with flexible curriculum, students' character and potential could be shaped based on their cultural background and surrounding environment.

## AUTHORS DECLARATION

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest in this article.

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