

TEACHING POETRY TO THE DEAF FOR LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY

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Research conducted revealed that Malaysian Deaf students continue to struggle with their education, especially their written language and Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) acquisition. Studies done globally have shown that poetry education can improve the quality of education of the Deaf. A collaborative study led by a hearing poet educator was conducted via an online workshop between two hearing Malaysian poet educators and one Malaysian Deaf educator, who had minimal experience with poetry, as part of a project titled 'Deaf Poetry'. The research set out to: discover if poetry education could help improve Malaysian Deaf students' development of BIM proficiency and self-expression, as well as to explore whether written poetry could be a bridge to BIM poetry learning, and finally to experiment with intersemiotic translation approaches (Pollitt) as a way of revealing the multi-modal nature of BIM which could make the BIM poetry 'readable' to non-Deaf audiences. Exposed to poetry education, the study found that the Deaf educator was able to develop creative BIM techniques. This in turn allowed them to explore new ways of self-expression bringing them into a closer relationship with BIM and a Malaysian Deaf identity. The non-deaf participants were able to appreciate BIM and BIM poetry and all participants reported developing a deeper understanding of poetry, self-expression and language translation.

Keywords: Malaysian deaf education, Malaysian Sign Language literature, BIM poetry

INTRODUCTION

The sign language used by Deaf people in Malaysia is known as Malaysian Sign Language (translation: *Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia* which is known as BIM). The term BIM is not just an acronym but a linguistic identity for the Malaysian Deaf community. Bell et al. (2015) noted that BIM began to take its place in 1954 at the Federation School for the Deaf. As the students psychologically needed to have human communication, they began developing sords [a combination of handshake, palm orientation, location, movement and non-manual marker (if any) that carries its own meaning] while their teachers were not in the classroom. The students

engaged in gestural conversation where they expressed their feelings, opinions and thoughts. Through the engagement, they invented simple sords to visualise things.

The term “sord” as a noun resulting from the blending of “sign” and “word”, was introduced by Malaysian Sign Language and Deaf Studies Association in 2019 (RC Deaf Mission Malaysia, 2019; Chong & Chong, 2020), to address the confusion that Deaf people currently face as they were unable to differentiate between “sign” and “sign language”. It is necessary to educate both Deaf and hearing people who often misunderstand the difference between a sign, which represents a spoken word and a sord.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Special Education for the Deaf

Ninety five percent of Deaf people are born to hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). These young Deaf children usually do not have BIM linguistic exposure until they graduate from secondary school. Deaf children in Malaysia usually miss their developmental milestones in language acquisition, although they are already exposed to written languages using Total Communication. The special education for the Deaf only allows the use of Total Communication. Total Communication did not invest in the BIM conversed by Deaf people but made a different technology, which is known as Manually Coded Malay (translation: *Kod Tangan Bahasa Melayu* or KTBM), whose sords are based on Malay words adapted from American Sign Language (ASL). Deaf students are required to sign the Malay words they wish to express, and the signing must be according to Malay grammar. KTBM put a temporary end to the development of BIM until Deaf students graduated from school. Consequently Deaf students were unable to communicate in KTBM as well as in Malay. Therefore, Deaf people developed new sords of their own to communicate with their Deaf peers. It might be around 2000 when Deaf people started to realise that the sign language they were conversing daily was known as BIM (Chong, 2018).

A circular dated 29 June 2021 called out school teachers to refer to Malaysian School Governance Guidelines for both primary and secondary students, which were under the Ministry of Education publication. In both guidelines, it was compulsory for school teachers to teach Total Communication Sign Language (translation: *Bahasa Isyarat Komunikasi Seluruh*) to Deaf students in classrooms (*Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia*, 2021). Primary School Standard Curriculum (translation: *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* which is known as KSSR) for Communication Sign Language (BIK) Year 1, which was published in 2015 emphasised that Deaf students learn BIK for Malay mastery, i.e. their signing must be according to Malay grammar (*Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia*, 2015). Regardless of whether it is KTBM or BIK, their *modus operandi* remained the same; that the purpose of the students signing was to master Malay. BIK facilitated Malay learning and acquisition in classrooms (Bell et al., 2015). However, Deaf students did not use KTBM or BIK to learn English, but used another set of sords entirely, typically SEE (Signing Exact English), ASL (American Sign Language) or Sign English, according to the Primary School Standard Curriculum for English Year 1, which was published in 2017. The curriculum gave instructions that Deaf students need to “see” (listen) and “sign” (articulate and sound out) English words according to SEE, ASL Dictionary and Comprehensive Sign English Dictionary (*Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia*, 2017). The use of many tools (KTBM, BIK, SEE, Sign English) and the

use of foreign sign language has caused confusion amongst Deaf students who have not been able to develop and strengthen their language foundation in either BIM, Malay or English.

BIM is still not widely used in society or schools even after the enactment of the 'Persons with Disabilities Act' in 2008 recognising BIM as the primary language for the Deaf in their communication. In short, BIM did not become part of the education of the Deaf (Khairul et al., 2018). The Deaf were required to put effort into acquiring BIM on their own outside school. Deaf people have shown to not be able to differentiate between KTBM and BIM (Ho, personal communication, June 30, 2021). Also, due to their experience with family, they do not have confidence in their social interactions. It takes deaf people a longer time than their hearing peers to get familiar with classmates, only then communication can follow. Deaf people tend to translate word for word from English or Bahasa Melayu and lack an understanding of metaphor and other figurative language commonly used in written languages. For example, the idiom - *It is raining cats and dogs*. They would see "rain", "cat" and "dog". They do not understand the actual meaning of the sentence because of the way they translate meaning literally.

Poetry in the Education of the Deaf

In designing a pedagogical approach to tackle the educational issues facing the Deaf in Malaysia, the researchers considered the importance of Deaf literature to Deaf identity. Sutton-Spence and Kaneko (2020) describe sign language literature as encompassing folklore (which reflects the culture of a community), fiction, and poetry, as well as oratory, autobiographies, chronicles, and religious literature. The literature might, depending on their global region, prioritise deafness as a subject matter or other issues impacting the community such as race or politics, for example. Sign language literature historically includes face-to-face performances anywhere Deaf people gather such as weddings, funerals and other social gatherings. Today, Deaf literature is found in video format, particularly online lending it more accessible to people who live without, or don't have access to, a Deaf community. This could be particularly impactful in Malaysia where Deaf people are especially disconnected from other Deaf people. Access to language remains a huge task, "Thus sign language literature exposes the community to skilled signers. And those signers revel in exploring the boundaries of their language. By doing so, they give their audience (i.e., the community) license to do likewise." (Napoli, 2017).

Signed poetry is a form of Deaf literature that incorporates creative signing techniques such as Visual Vernacular and role-shift. It is highly developed in countries where natural sign languages have been accepted as the language of the Deaf and where there is a high usage of sign language. Signed poetry, like written poetry, draws attention to the way language is used and how meaning is created through structure and style. Poetry is also a highly visual form of language, a quality that brings it closer into a relationship with sign languages. Where written poems create images in the mind's eyes using words, signed poems are crafted moving images created through a visual vernacular of handshape, sords and movement, facial expression and gesture by manipulating point of view and perspective (role shifting) within the space around the body. The body of the poet is the poem told within space like a picture frame or movie (Bauman, 2006). BIM is truly a fully embodied language.

In BIM poems, sords can be modified differently from daily conversation to match the expression. For example, the handshape of the sord for “flower” is modified from handshape ‘O’ to a different handshape ‘O and then 5’. The movement of the sord “river” becomes intense and slow to indicate a very long endless river. Such modifications allow a Deaf audience to appreciate rhythm, as if they were listening to a song.

As Deaf Malaysians tend to struggle to express themselves because they have limited communication skills, BIM poetry is a way for Deaf people to explore self-expression in their own native sign language. Particularly, their facial expressions which are usually vague with little clarification. Facial clarifications are a vital part of sign language fluency. Creative signing mediums like poetry, allows Deaf people to use their sords and enables them to turn their sords into more nuanced and more personal expression. By teaching Deaf learners to create BIM poetry, educators can help Deaf people to improve their self-expression and fluency. Sutton-Spence (2014) said, “...the important connection between literature, language, language learning and the language learner. I argue that children should see signed poetry as part of their signed L1 (the first language) development in schools as it impacts on their language skills and their own sense of self and identity” (p. 113). Language is more than utility. It is part of personal and cultural identity and poetry is an expression of that identity. This is the same for Deaf people.

Bilingual Education

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 emphasises that it is important to have bilingual or multilingual education in school as Malaysia consists of people speaking different languages. Nor Azmi (2016) argues that it is not harmful to have bilingual education and having bilingual education will potentially improve their first language. The United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises that every child with disabilities has equal opportunity to access to their education. Chong and Rosila Bee (2021) suggests that it is important for Deaf students to acquire BIM as their first language before they can start their school education. Having said that, Deaf students would need to study in classrooms with BIM as their medium of instruction.

By increasing access to BIM in schools and removing barriers to their own language, subsequently increasing their opportunities to improve their BIM proficiency, Deaf students therefore will be able to develop their own literature which in turn will strengthen their sense of their own unique identity. Indeed, the implementation of a new school curriculum in 2015 that stipulated South African Sign Language (SASL) be taught at schools for Deaf learners, “accelerated the development of SASL literature, involving various stakeholders in generating creative texts in SASL that can be used as teaching and learning materials” (Sutton-Spence & Kaneko, p, 370, 2020).

Schools and education systems that teach sign language to Deaf learners and, who have seen huge improvements in overall academic performance, use a bilingual strategy. Bilingual education is a ‘language before literacy’ approach. A bilingual education aims to enable Deaf children to become linguistically competent, to provide access to a wide curriculum, to facilitate good literacy skills, and to provide Deaf students with a positive sense of their own identity.

Bilingual education is dependent on a knowledge of L1 (first language). BIM can then be transferred to and facilitate the development of L2 (the second language) Malay or English. This is known as the “linguistic interdependence model” (Gregory, 1996). However, it is necessary for Deaf students to acquire BIM at the earliest age possible in order to have sufficient language foundation before studying school subjects. An Open University study of Deaf children in the UK research demonstrated that “most pupils arrived in school with limited linguistic skills in either BSL or English and the initial work with them had to focus on basic language development setting them behind their hearing peers in other aspects of the curriculum” (Gregory, 1996, para. 7).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The research set out to discover if poetry education could help improve Malaysian Deaf students’ development of BIM proficiency and self-expression, as well as to explore whether written poetry could be a bridge to BIM poetry learning, and finally to experiment with intersemiotic translation approaches (Pollitt) as a way of revealing the multi-modal nature of BIM which could make the BIM poetry ‘readable’ to non-Deaf audiences.

Specifically, in this paper, the researchers explore the possibility of developing and using BIM Literature, a face-to-face visual literature (stories that have been preserved and passed down from generation to generation by the act of signed storytelling instead of spoken or written down) to develop BIM proficiency in Deaf Malaysians. The research is guided by Deaf epistemologies, poetry and bilingual education pedagogies for the Deaf, and theories of translation found largely through the works of Sutton-Spence (2014), Pollitt (2018) and Chong (2018).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The case study explored and modified the four assumptions as set out in a study of ASL using middle schoolers but in the context of BIM, titled *Teaching Poetry: A Descriptive Case Study of a Poetry Unit in a Classroom of Urban Deaf Adolescents* (Arenson & Kretschmer, 2010). The assumptions were modified to fit the purpose of this case study.

Participants of the Study

Three research participants for the study were: a hearing multimedia poet, a novice hearing BIM signer-poet and a Deaf educator, led by a hearing poet educator. All four had little to no experience with BIM poetry and only two were able to communicate in BIM, only one of which was proficient. All three artist/educator-researchers would (a) benefit from learning BIM poetry, (b) be able to create a BIM poem after the workshop sharings, (c) non deaf participants (non BIM users) would learn to ‘read’ a BIM poem with the help of intersemiotic translation techniques and would (d) come to view BIM poetry as a vehicle for expressing their feelings and ideas.

Procedure of the Study

This case study took the form of a 12 week online collaborative project involving Titled “Deaf Poetry”, the project was sponsored by the British Council Southeast Asia’s artist exchange fund as part of their Connecting Through Culture grant between July 2020 and October 2020. The proposed outputs were to design a multimedia BIM poem with English translation as well as a learning methodology to teach poetry to Deaf learners. Conducted on a bi-weekly basis through a series of sharing sessions and workshops, the participants were invited to facilitate sessions in order to teach each other the various aspects of poetry education including poetry writing and analysis, multimedia poetry, basic BIM, and translation theory. Each research-participant facilitated a session based on their individual expertise and experience.

Lesson Overview

The lesson is designed in eight parts and can be implemented over as many lessons necessary according to the teacher’s available class time and resources. Individual lessons should be repeated if learning outcomes aren’t achieved. The lesson should be delivered by a *trained BIM educator or BIM poet/storyteller with an arts/poet facilitator-educator. Resources will be provided.

Objectives

1. To use poetry to improve vocabulary, creative self-expression and fluency in BIM
2. To use poetry to improve vocabulary, creative self-expression and fluency in English/Malay
3. To create an appreciation for poetry, storytelling and other creative sign techniques
4. To nurture a Deaf identity, sense of deafhood, to build confidence
5. To develop Deaf Literature

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be able to create their own poems in BIM.
2. Students will be able to tell a personal story in BIM.
3. Students will be able to tell a popular fairytale in BIM.
4. Students will be able to ‘sing’ a song in BIM.
5. Students will be able to translate simple poems and songs from English/Malay into BIM.
6. Students will be able to experiment with technology and multimedia tools to produce poetry.

****Lesson 1 of 8: Teaching BIM storytelling through movement and dance***

1. Warm up: mirror dancing
2. Create a simple dance - in groups of 3-5 persons, the first person will create a movement, then the second will copy/mirror the first movement, and then create a new one. Repeat the process until everyone in the group has contributed a movement and learned each one. They can have as many rounds as they wish until the group can no longer continue or time is up. Tell the class that they can use animal movements or any other gestures using their entire bodies like hands, legs, and even head. The use of pictures might be useful to trigger their imagination. Students can act out what is in the picture through free expression of movement.

3. Dancing hands - Use handshapes for example, handshape “1” to make a life story about a worm. Introduce ‘personification’. In a group of 3-5, ask the first person to start the story (this can be the facilitator), for example, a ‘worm crawls’. The next person will repeat the first movement, and create a second movement like “worm crawls on a tree branch”. The third person repeats the first and second movements, and creates a new movement. The fourth and fifth repeat the same process, with the first person repeating the same process. They may also extend it to new rounds until time is up or until the group runs out of ideas. The group can start a new activity by having two handshapes (for example, handshape ‘5’ and ‘1’) to make another story using the process as above.
4. Write the story about the worm based on the group ‘dance’.

Outcome

The students are able to improve their imagination and self-expression and are able to transfer these skills into gestural communication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A BIM poem was developed based on the sharings of the workshops. The BIM poem was created by the Deaf educator based on his experience as a Deaf Person living in Malaysia through visual vernacular and BIM sords. The multimedia poet translated the poem into English and multimedia with little knowledge of BIM, applying intersemiotic translation theory and practices (Pollitt, 2018). Once the multimedia poet had finalised the English translation, the written poem was verified by the Deaf educator with very minor adjustments for clarity of meaning. The multimedia poet included multimedia elements as part of the translation to translate the visual and movement qualities of BIM.

Poetics of BIM

This project made four thematic discoveries: The first theme is poetics of BIM, where that poetry can be expressed not only through written/spoken languages, but also through BIM. Also, poetry that is developed or inspired using written/spoken languages can be applied to BIM poetry learning and the skills required to write a poem can be transferred from written/spoken languages to sign languages, provided cultural languages remains during the knowledge transfer:

“Basically, BIM poetry does not exist in Deaf community in Malaysia, so we [the Deaf community] do not know how to start BIM poetry learning. Through this project, I found that learning and understanding poetry techniques in other languages did help me to develop a BIM poem. When I read the English poems, I translated their words into images. That is how I appreciated the English poem.”

(Deaf educator, 2020)

“... It helped me expand my vocabulary in both English and BIM, and the way I read/understand poetry.”

(Novice BIM signer, 2020)

“In retrospect, it would have been interesting to use English poems written by Malaysian poets (simply for its more local imagery) and see how it translates into BIM.”

(Multimedia poet, 2020)

Language Development through Bilingual Poetry Education

The second theme found is that language development is possible through bilingual poetry education. The Deaf educator, who was the only participant fluent in BIM, was able to develop his creative signing techniques but reported that concepts like metaphor and other poetic devices remained alien to him. However, he was able to translate written poetic devices such as rhythm, rhyme, and metaphor through modified BIM sords, which matched his experience and visual vernacular. He reported that he learned to not restrict himself to BIM which helped him be more creative in expressing his feelings and perspective. Even though BIM is still not a fully developed language (Chong, 2018), the Deaf educator was able to express his experience through his hands using rhythm, which is differentiated from his daily chat.

“I used my imagery skills and translated them into BIM sords. When I produced BIM sords, I tended to make some modifications on the sords, to differentiate them from daily sords, however, they stayed within linguistic parameters, to make sure BIM signers could understand the modified sords. If not, it would not be considered as BIM poem.”

(Deaf educator, 2020)

After a few basic lessons and practise the Deaf educator was able to use BIM to create a signed poem proving that BIM is a language through which poetry, a highly aestheticised form of literature that plays on the musicality of language, can be created and can benefit the community. He said of the experience:

“With the right tools, we [the Deaf] will be able to produce our own poems. I believe with a lot of doing your own poems, it will trigger your passion and it will make sure you put more effort into understanding and analysing other English or BIM poetry. They [poems] could also have different perspectives based on the poet’s background. With the ability to compose our own poems, we will be able to think why and how the other poets do the same thing for their poems.”

(Deaf educator, 2020)

As in written poetry education, composing your own poem and experiencing how a poem is crafted yourself, is vital to the learning experience as well as watching and learning from other foreign Deaf poets.

“I wish I could watch BIM poetry. Unfortunately, we do not have BIM poetry existing in Malaysia except mine...However, from my experience of watching ASL poetry, it gave me a feeling and it enabled me to feel and understand poetry. Ironically, I was new to ASL [but] I was able to understand the message better. I could feel [it]. So it must be my nature to understand sign language more than any spoken/written language.”

(Deaf educator, 2020)

The Deaf educator would have benefited from watching other BIM poets performing in BIM. Yet he was successful in creating a poem using BIM by watching videos of ASL poems. ASL is a language that comes more naturally to him as a Deaf Person even though he is not fluent in it. Deaf people can access poetry if they are first and foremost introduced to it through their own sign language.

Artist Exchanges and Cultural Production through Translation

Artist exchanges and cultural production through translation is the third theme. BIM is indeed a live language and is not limited by a fixed translation, as in the way KTBM works, i.e. one sord for one word. Literal translation from one language to another language is almost impossible, let alone poetry translation. It is necessary to translate the rhythm and movement of a BIM poem and not just the signs:

“I enjoyed learning how sords work and giving a translation of sords into words (and vice versa), a try. Again, it has something to do with what drew me to poetry when I was young: the images and the rhythm. To be able to 'sense' that rhythm through the use of physical actions rather than hearing has been quite a ride.”

(Multimedia poet, 2020)

“I may unintentionally make the material my 'own' without taking away the real/intended meaning, although undoubtedly it may have deviated a little bit (or a lot).”

(Novice BIM signer, 2020)

Through the performance of an intersemiotic translation and applying Pollitt's rule of 'affordance' (Pollitt, 2018), the multimedia poet, who had never acquired BIM, reported that they were able to grasp meaning from the BIM poems and surprisingly, developed a deeper understanding of poetry in general:

“It helped me appreciate the visual cues signed by [the Deaf educator] in his poems. It's almost like the feeling I have when I read an image, simile, or metaphor that I have never read before.”

(Multimedia poet, 2020)

Understanding About Deaf Cultural Identity

Fourth and last theme revealed is about gaining an understanding about Deaf cultural identity. Both the multimedia poet and novice BIM signers commented that they were able to understand and experience the Deaf educator's experience growing up through his BIM poem:

“I now understand a little bit more how BIM poetry is expressed using common and/or modified sords, movements and locations, as well as figurative language. Previously if I were to translate a BIM poem, I would stick to signing the meaning only.”

(Novice BIM signer, 2020)

“...It opened my eyes to just how visually heavy sign language is. I have never heard of sords before and was very much intrigued by how language adapts and morphs according to the needs of its users.”

(Multimedia poet, 2020)

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Deaf students should be provided a quality education (SDG 4) through their native language so that “no one should be left behind”. Total communication therefore should no longer be used for Deaf learners to acquire Bahasa Melayu through KTBM and BIK, nor English through SEE and Sign English as this prevents Deaf learners from fulfilling their potential through language deprivation.

Poetry in Deaf Education should be facilitated by a Deaf educator proficient in BIM and one who is exposed to BIM poetry. It is important to allow the Deaf learners to not limit their creative use of sign language poetry. Watching others is the best way to learn. Working in tandem with arts educators is also vital to planning and delivering the lessons. These arts educators who apply critical drama education pedagogies interact well with both the performative aspects of BIM as well as with the context of learning poetry in Deaf Education, which is concerned with empowerment, identity building and community engagement.

This approach also promotes bilingual education in schools for Deaf learners where the basic requirements are the involvement of native users of BIM, and the delivery of at least some curriculum areas in BIM with explicit approaches to using BIM to develop reading and writing skills. Finally, any BIM curriculum would need to take into account the diverse nature of Deaf people in Malaysia in terms of gender, race, class, ability, and education, as well as the differing degrees of exposure to BIM. A BIM poetry lesson plan has been developed based on these findings and can be found in the appendix section to give inspiration to any educator searching for ways to improve the education of their Deaf students. Enjoy!

CONCLUSION

Learning poetry is not easy for Deaf learners due to a lack of language proficiency and exposure to poetry: BIM or written. However, because of the visual nature of BIM poetry, it allows for a fully embodied experience of language learning which does not depend on written language proficiency. Creating poetry in BIM naturally improves vocabulary and builds a deeper relationship with language which are vital for language learning and connection (Sutton-Space, 2014). This will in turn help scaffold the learning of other written languages. These claims were also reflected in the research participants’ sharing experience. Furthermore, with the development of digital and online technologies, the definition of poetry is expanding. Deaf poets and arts and language educators today have access to more tools to help create, record and share their poems and stories in BIM that interact with other art forms, enhancing the quality of the literature and making it more accessible to both Deaf and hearing people. From the findings, poetry education would benefit Deaf learners by accelerating both their BIM and written language acquisition as well as strengthening their language foundation. Once Deaf learners have had a chance to explore and experiment their BIM through poetry play, self-expression and communication should improve; and while poetry education is certainly

concerned with language, it is also interested in developing empowering personal narratives that can contribute - vitally so, to the liberation of the Deaf community in Malaysia.

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Appendix:

A Sample of Poetry Unit Lesson Plan

Methodology - *Proposed Target Age Group: Primary

This poetry unity is intended to fit into a wider BIM curriculum and was designed with the following evidence-based data:

- Most Deaf people in Malaysia have not received formal BIM learning in schools.
- Most of the Deaf students in Malaysia are not BIM users when they first enter primary school.
- Most of the Deaf students in Malaysia have limited language skills in both English and Malay.
- The teaching and learning methodology should take into account bilingual learning pedagogies.
- The teaching and learning methodology uses arts education pedagogies - learning through drama, storytelling and movement.
- Using multimedia technologies as both a learning tool and outcome.