



THE SEMAI FOLKTALES CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PRESERVATION THROUGH INNOVATION

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Abstract

The study reveals the suitability of two Semai folktales to be used in ESL classrooms as teaching materials. The researcher has taken the initiative to reproduce the folktales she has collected via oral tradition using a snowball sampling method. The animated movie of a folktale Bah Bertai and a puppet show of Cen Cemena were used in the English language classroom to teach reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. A quiz via Kahoot was also introduced in the classroom to test the students understanding of the stories. A focus group interview was conducted after the lessons using the Semai folktales as the medium. The finding show that most students weren't aware of the existence of the Semai community. However, most of them agreed that the enjoyed learning the new knowledge about the Indigenous culture. This paper argues for sustainability through innovation and posits that cultural heritage practices that continue to be performed are those that are adaptable, flexible to change and open to innovation – therefore maintaining relevance to time, context and consumers. This paper posits that researchers should be flexible and practical in their research actions and avoid generalizations that come out of recent and popular critical theories as the most, or only suitable, approaches for diverse communities.

Keywords:

Semai, preservation, practice-led research, Indigenous folk tales, Intangible cultural heritage

Introduction

The Semai folktales reflect the traditional practices, unique cultures and heritage, the social and lifestyles of the Semai's tribe in the ancient time and place. It also mirrors the people's culture, personal and world view. In Semai community, folktales which was told orally was a dominant medium used in educating and entertaining the tribes of the concerned culture. As folktales is

facing extinction, the need therefore arises for an interface between the folktale genre and the media where the latter intervenes in the promotion of the genre for its sustenance in society. The aim of producing Bah Bertai animated movies production and Cen Cemena puppet show accompanied by a compact disc of its narration, dialogs and music is to revitalize the folk tales, music and cultural heritage of the indigenous Semai by condensing them into an innovative resource package, tailored to appeal to the current generation's consumer interests and lifestyles. These projects help to promote the folktales of the indigenous Semai in a way that can attract the young Semai to learn the priceless cultures and values of their tribe in one hand, and learn the English language on the other by doing the interactive activities prepared in the application related to the animated movies they have watched. With the immense popularity of social networking and technology, it is high time to develop a high-tech edutainment product for the young Semai to quench their thirst for knowledge. This interesting and fascinating product design is aligned with the 21st century teaching and learning a language as it can be used in the classroom as technology-based language enrichment activities.

The targeted audiences for the product are Malaysians, in particular the Semai community, as well as other local, students and international consumers. The purpose of this paper is to examine a practice-led approach toward considering the empowerment of selected culture bearers assisted by the intervention of researchers from the academia in facilitating the sustainability of indigenous cultural traditions in Malaysia. This study has successfully promoted the idea of innovation as the effective ways to preserve these folktales from diminishing by introducing Semai folktales in ESL classrooms. It is observed that children stand to benefit from lessons derivable from folktales. Bah Bertai and Cen Cemena are among the popular folktales in the Semai community. The researchers will draw on a linguistic and structural analysis of folktales, and argue that there are certain major benefits in using folktales for teaching English as a second language (ESL). The result of the study shows that the students enjoyed ESL lessons using folktales and preferred the movie and the puppet show as the medium which are more relevant to the 21st century learners.

Problem Statement

Critics have examined folklore as ancient, uneducated, dying out and fundamentally dismissive. Against this backdrop, some critics limit the genres of folklore to three basic forms of narratives such as myth, folktales, and legends. The younger generation also have dismissed the idea of reading books of ancient folktales especially of the ones which consist different social values and cultural beliefs. It is the responsibility of the researchers to ensure a paradigm shift in promoting folklores through innovation especially in introducing the folktales in ESL classrooms using a different medium beside story books.

Objectives :

- To ensure folktales are told in more sophisticated ways which is in line with 21st century learning methodology.
- To educate the 21st century learners about good deeds in life.
- The researchers also aimed to develop two concepts of innovation which utilizes technology in an animated movie of Bah Bertai and a puppet show of Cen Cemena .
- To preserve the Semai folklore through efforts of innovation projects.

Literature Review

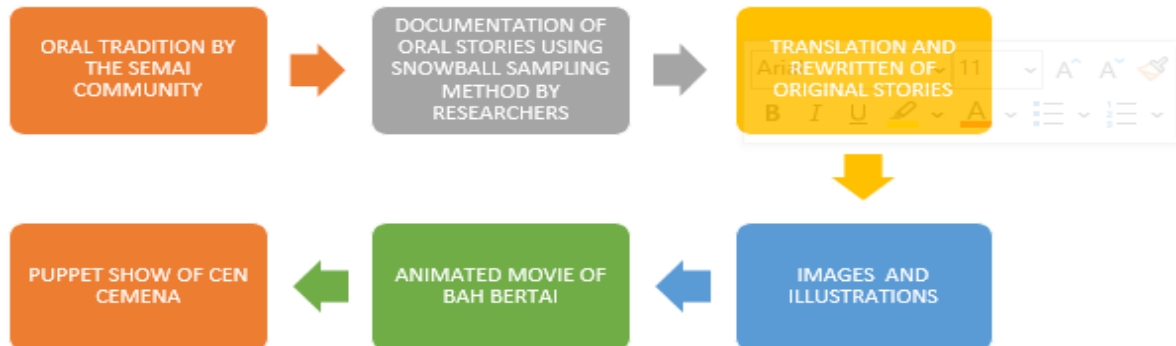
Folktales is defined as the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral examples. Every group with a sense of its own identity shares, as a central part of that identity, folk traditions – the things that people traditionally believe, do, know, make and say (American Folklore Society). Holden (2008)

highlighted the various forms of folklore expressions such as oral, as in folktales, musical, as in songs, actions, as in folk dances, plays or rituals. These folklore expressions are considered as “traditional knowledge” and passed down from generation to generation. Samsiah, Sharina, Nurazila & Azlan (2013) revealed that the Semai have portrayed some uniqueness with a vast collection of their ancestral folklore. Through telling and showing one another how to do things, they pass down the skills for survival such as hunting, building houses, making clothes, tools, medicine and religious practice. Through singing, telling stories, and plays, they nurture their strong beliefs in spirits and supernatural beings which dominate Semai’s daily lives from generation to generation.

According to Deputy Director of Education, Dr. Khair Muhamad Yusof, the unique cultures and the highly esthetic values of the Orang Asli tribe are not only to be preserved but must be revealed and exposed as additional reading materials. The initiative to produce book series or collection of Orang Asli folklore is essential as it can ensure that the young generations of Orang Asli are able to appreciate their folklore, culture and heritage. (Nik Sukry Ramly, Berita Harian, 18-24 Oktober 2010, p.02).

Methodology

This approach is practice-led – Bah Bertai Production and Cen Cemena puppet show was developed based on action, reflection, review and revision. This paper provides visibility to the research process, enabling readers to understand the issues, challenges and decision-making processes. The practice-led approach that was used for this project provides a realistic practical guide, bridging the gap between theory and practice. This research is qualitative in nature. It involves several stages that can be summarized as follow:



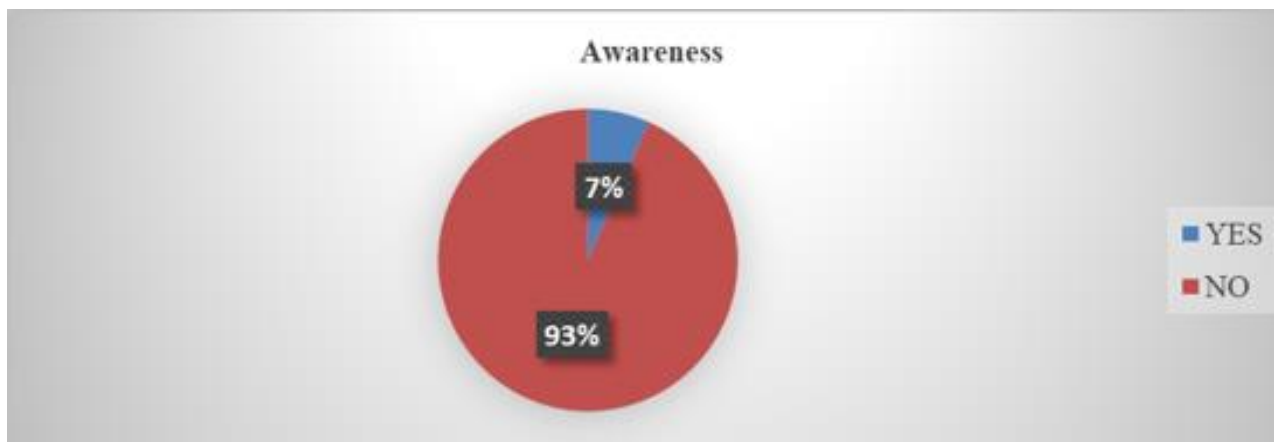
- Using a snowball sampling method, the researcher collected ten folktales from the Semai elderly, village headman, the Semai shaman, young Semai women and men via oral tradition.
- The stories were recorded and translated to Bahasa Melayu with the help of a Semai translator.
- The Semai folktales were translated and rewritten in English for the ESL teaching and learning purposes,
- In this study, two Semai folktales were chosen as edutainment project. McKay (2001) argues that there are three major benefits in using literature as content in ESL classrooms which are:
 - (i) demonstrating for learners the importance of language form to accomplish specific communicative purposes,
 - (ii) providing an ideal basis for integrating different language and

- (iii) raising students' and teachers' cross-cultural awareness.
- An enrichment games via Kahoot was introduced to test the students understanding of the folktales. Kahoot! is a digital game that can be used in classrooms to engage students through game like pre made or impromptu quizzes, discussions and surveys (Dellos, 2015 & John, 2015).

Results and Discussion

An interview session was conducted with a group of Diploma students to find out about the followings :

- Whether the students have heard of Semai people before.
 - Their preference of the medium of presentation between written story and animated movie (as in applications).
 - Feedback after watching the animated movies and the puppet show.
1. Whether the students have heard of Semai community before



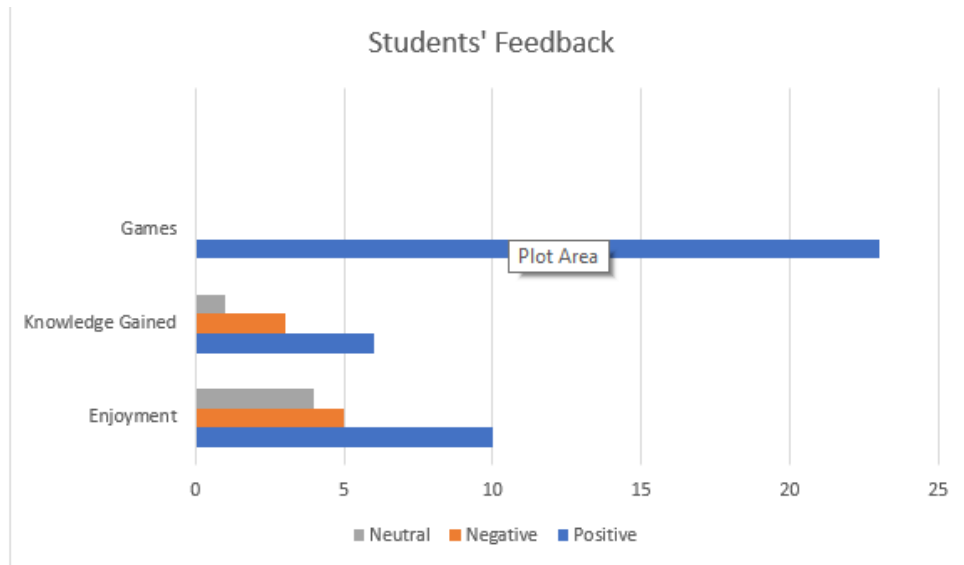
Almost all students are not aware of the existence of this minority group of people (orang asli) in our society. This is one of the evidences that many youngsters have zero or limited knowledge of the Semai which is the largest aboriginal tribe in Malaysia.

2. The students' preference of the medium of presentation between Text (storyboard as in handout) and animated movie (as in applications).

All (100%) of the students prefer to watch the animated movie rather than to read from handouts.

3. Feedback from the students after watching the movies

- 3.1 Did you enjoy the movies?
- 3.2 What have you learned from the movies?
- 3.3 Did you enjoy the games?



The results show that most students gave positive feedbacks on the medium, knowledge transfer and the medium of games.

Conclusion

Folktales can be used in a variety of ways to help children and students to develop stronger reading skills, to study other cultures, to model character traits, to appreciate other traditions, to learn about decision making, to explore new ways of seeing the world and to discover a love of stories positively. The project was one of the initiatives to preserve the folktale and the indigenous Semai rich culture and heritage. It is also an initiative to produce many references for the Semai future generations. Efforts of educating the young about the indigenous folktales in a fun, interactive and technology integrated way will help sustain the folktales. The development of an alternate approach, theory/concept and guidelines toward sustainability through innovation make this study the first of its kind. Three approaches can be recommended in advocating for cultural sustainability through innovation: collaboration between selected culture bearers and researchers in the academia; indigeneity of cultural expressions and illustrations; and adaptability and relevance to current interests of indigenous people and consumers of indigenous music and literature. This approach integrates tradition with creation.

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APA sixth style

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