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# TREND, POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES OF LOCAL LANGUAGES LEARNING DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

Romzi Ationg[1*], Mohd Sohaimi Esa[2], Irma Wani Othman[3*], Muhammad Safuan Yusoff [4]

[1]     Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia.
        Email: mrationg@ums.edu.my
[2]     Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia.
        Email: msohaimi@ums.edu.my
[3]     Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia.
        Email: irma@ums.edu.my
[4]     Fakulti Kewangan Antarabangsa Labuan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
        Email: safuan_y@yahoo.com
*       Corresponding Author

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**Abstract:**

In Malaysia, and other countries around the globe, it appears that one who speaks a native language enters the sector of employment with abilities and talents. The reason is that they are able to communicate not only with the foreigner when they also speak international as well as the key national language, but also handsomely be able to explain as well as understand what the locals need through communication. Accordingly, in Malaysia and specifically in Sabah, children are encouraged to learn their native language either via a formal or informal learning process. This includes the use of the audio-lingual model, communicative approach, direct instruction, grammar-translation model, and total physical response. Nevertheless, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the change in the trend, potential, and challenges of native or local language learning. This paper presents a discussion on the trend, potential, and challenges of local language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of a qualitative approach, an approach in which required an examination of information gathered from various sources such as books, journals, and media reports. It is hoped that the paper helps readers to understand exactly is the new trend, potential, and challenges of local language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

In Malaysia, and other country around the globe, it is appeared that one who speak a native language enter sector of employment with abilities and talents. The reason is that they be able to communicate not only with the foreigner when they also speak international as well as the key national language, but also handsomely be able to explain as well as understood what the locals needs through communication. Accordingly, in Malaysia and specifically in Sabah, children are encouraged to learn their native language either via formal or informal learning process. Apart from the need to ensure the population, in general, be able to communicate with their own society, such move is also aim at preventing the country from the danger of losing the native languages and acquiring the benefits of bilingualism (Othman, Awang, Yusoff & Jupiter, 2017). As the IDRA (2020) portrays, maintaining the native language is matter for various reasons. This includes to help the new generation value his or her cultural and heritage which contributes to a positive self-conception, prepare the new generation to interact with the native community. Thus, maintain links with family and other community members, helps the new generation improve their intellectual maturity through interaction with the native community, and given that one who speaks multi-languages often have higher academic achievement then it is important to stress that maintaining native language also ensure the new generation becomes higher academic achievers. Apart from that, the IDRA (2020) also argued that maintaining the native language is vital for economic purpose because bilingual ability makes one be able to acquire better employment opportunities in his or her country and overseas.

Accordingly, Anne (2018), though she never mentioned about the native language learning, she explains that there are at least five approaches in language learning namely audio-lingual model, communicative approach, direct instruction, grammar translation model, and total physical response. The audio-lingual model is a language learning approach that based on the idea that repetition is key to language learning, and that it emphasises the need for learners to listen, repeat and memorizes any dialogue. As it is focuses on dialogue, it appeared that such method provided no instruction because grammar never been the focus. The communicative approach, on the other hand, is a language learning approach that focuses on getting the learners to communicate orally and in writing, in real life scenarios. The learning activities might be organized thematically, and that explicit grammar instruction is not a core of this approach. Nevertheless, it stressed the importance of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

As for the direct instruction, Anne (2018) explains that such a learning approach is based on the idea that the learners acquire a second language much in the way that they learned other language through total immersion. As it is aim at acquiring a second language, listening and speaking become the top teaching priority in this learning approach. While, grammar is not necessarily vital in direct instruction approach, the grammar-translation model focuses on learning grammar through comparisons. In this aspect, a sample activity in the grammar-translation classroom can be to diagram a sentence in at least two different languages in order to help the learner become aware of the grammatical differences between the two languages.

Minimally, however, the total physical response learning approach heavily focuses on teaching vocabulary, in which the learners acquire as they learn a physical movement to accompany each new word or phrase in the target language. The reason of such emphasis is the idea that there is an intimate connection between physical movement and language acquisition. Therefore, it is not a surprise that such a learning approach focuses on physical movement.

These learning approach, though not necessarily true, has been in effect since many years around the globe. Some even described these approaches as the best approach in language learning, but others might interest in describing these approaches as the traditional approach. This is especially true in Sabah, Malaysia following the advent of COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this paper seeks to examine the trend, potential and challenges of local language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Rationale for the Examination of Trend, Potential and Challenges of Local Language Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The advent of 2019 saw the rise of COVID-19 linked pandemic, in which the pandemic continued up until the date the paper is written and or is continuing until an unspecified date. As Zhu, Wei and Niu (2020), and Mcleod (16 March 2020), explains, the deadly virus was first detected in Wuhan, China by end of 2019. Thereafter, the virus quickly spread throughout China, thus led to the significance and rapid response from the government of China in the form of policy implementation and medical infrastructure constructions. The policy, particularly the 'lockdown of many major cities as well as the country', in turn made the typical tight weekday schedule and hectic weekend lifestyle were replaced with staying indoors in the blink of an eye. The concept of 'stay-at-home', 'stay safe and healthy', 'social distancing' and 'Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)' thus has become phrases echoed by many around the globe, in which it generally appeared in both social and printed medias at the aim of reminding everyone of the virus's lethal nature. When the virus reached other countries, the government of such countries also implement similar approach that is the 'lockdown'. As according to Pak, Adegboye, Adekunle, Rahman, McBryde and Eisen (2020), by early 2020, the COVID-19 has infected hundreds of thousands of people all around the world. This includes not only the developing countries but also the developed of high-income countries such as Russia, Italy, Australia and United States of America. The result of such development has been the implementation of 'lockdown' policy there. In Malaysia, similar approach has also been executed, but it is named as the 'Movement Control Order (MCO).

When this policy came into effect, many areas of human lives are eventually being affected. The local language learning has been among has been among the areas of human life which affected by the policy. The impact, however, is not necessary discouraging, rather it also involves numbers of encouraging consequences. This is especially true in the case of local language learning, especially in the context of trend, potential and challenges associated with the activity. But how, exactly has been the trend, potential and challenges of local language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? This is the theme in which the paper intended to highlight. Specifically, a mentioned, the objective of this paper is to provide explanation on

the trend, potential and challenges of local language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Sabah in Malaysia.

In order to understand what exactly are the trends, potentials and challenges of local languages learning during COVID-19 pandemic, the study which the paper is based applies a qualitative approach through the examination of information gathered from various sources such as books, journals and media reports. As to ensure that the obtained information represents the issues being studied or to ensure the construct validity of the information, all documents 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, Castillo, Diaz, & Kiciman, 11 July 2019; Rahm & Do, 2000). Information or data cleaning is especially essential when dealing with information from multi-sources (Ationg, Esa, Ibrahim & Muis, 2020; Ationg, Zulhaimi, Ibrahim & Hashim, 2018; Ationg, 2018; Rahman, Ationg & Zulhaimi, 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. After all, the data gathered were administered and analysed using relevant qualitative techniques that is interpretation of data by the researcher. It is an approach where the researcher is required to focuses on the meaning and the process of making-meaning. 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.

**The Trend, Potential and Challenges of Local Languages Learning During Pandemic**
Based on the information gathered, this section presents a discussion about the trends, potential and challenges of local languages learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of trend of local language learning, many suggests that, today, distance learning has almost completely replaced traditional teaching methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of quarantine measures. Kamal, Zubanova, Isaeva and Movchun (2021), for example, suggests that distance learning has almost completely replaced traditional teaching methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of quarantine measures. Li and Lalani (29 April 2020) later came into agreement with Kamal, Zubanova, Isaeva and Movchun (2021) when they said "*The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever*". Due to the rise of online learning, some countries such as Ireland even concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted language learning activities (Caollaí, 2 June 2021). This is also taking places in Sabah of Malaysia when the native language learning activities generally disrupted following the advent of COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, it is by now clear that the native language learning in Sabah become much focuses on online learning approach. Therefore, this sudden shift away from the traditional approaches, some are

wondering whether the adoption of online learning will continue to persist in Sabah post-pandemic. In addition, some also wondering of how such a shift would impact the effort to ensure the maintenance of their native language.

Despite the concern, however, many argued that the shift away from the traditional learning approach, OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (24 July 2020) the new learning approach namely the online learning increases learning opportunities. The OECD explains that online delivery helps broaden the reach of not only adult but also children learning. Specifically, it is argued that the online learning has the potential to address the barriers associated with the low participation in native language learning due fees issue among the learners. In fact, it allows the learners to choose a time and place in which compatible with their needs. The flexibility of online learning courses, as portrays by Anderton, Vitali, Blackmore and Bakeberg (2021), is particularly important for native language learning that is meant to facilitate the learners needs. Therefore, by providing more flexibility, online learning tends to encourage many in learning their native language. In addition, it is also normal that the price of online learning activities often cheaper as compared to the traditional approaches. In explaining such an argument, He, Gao, Xiao, Liu, He and Barber (2017), stressed that of course online learning is a cheaper way to teach students, thus the fee applies must also be cheaper.

Apart from such an advantage, other researcher such as Appana (2008) found that an online learning often emphasises interaction between the learners and the instructors. Just like in many cases, the Sabah case also appeared so, and that such quality becomes the major factor in determining the learner's performance. Thus, an online learning is also providing opportunity for continuity of native language learning activities. Having said that, however, many remain sceptical with the online learning approach. The key challenges associated with the new trend in local language learning as portrayed by Li and Lalani (29 April 2020) is effectiveness of online learning.

Maslen (4 May 2020), stresses that the world population in now facing the decline in their learning and learning performance as a result of the switch to online learning following the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. He argued that researchers around the globe found that the decline is inevitably affects the learners' performance. This is especially applicable to those from advantaged group namely B40 (literally means the bottom 40% of the income group in Malaysia) as they generally lacking capability in purchasing gadgets for online learning use such as computer, laptop, tabs and smart phone. To complicate the matter further, internet connection is also problematic in Sabah. In fact, many areas around the land remains no internet access (Bernama, 9 May 2020). Therefore, given that online learning will continue or even be further accelerated, the problem relating to internet access must be prioritized by the policy makers. The advent of COVID-19 pandemic must be seen as a call for strong will among the policy makers and other stakeholders to ensure the internet connection available all over the country, and particularly in Sabah.

**Conclusion**
As the discussion portrays, the advent of COVID-19 pandemic leads to the change in trend, potential and challenges of local language learning. It specifically appears that though the

pandemic is generally described by many as the key problem in human life today, it also brings about significant positive improvement on many aspects. This includes the area of local language learning activities. The traditional local language learning approach which is often neglected by the new generation eventually find tune when the online learning is added as a new local language learning approach. The significant use of online learning also provides opportunities for not only encouragement to learn native language among the new generation, but also makes the native language available to global communities. This in turn made the language become known to others located in other countries around the globe, thus helps maintain the native language. Despite that, however, the native language learning encountered numbers of challenges associated with the significant use of online learning. For this reason, this paper provides few suggestions for overcoming such challenges.

**Acknowledgment**

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