

# **Using a Multilingual Approach to Develop Advocacy Skills**

**MARY ANNE VAZ**

*Sarawak Campus of the Institute of Teacher Education, Miri, Sarawak,  
Malaysia*

**MARCUS RAJA**

*Lopeng Tengah Secondary School, Miri, Sarawak  
Malaysia*

## **Abstract**

This is an interpretive action research that documents the use of a multilingual approach to develop advocacy skills among teacher trainees. The research design is qualitative in nature and is informed by a constructivist epistemology. The respondents were the audience and performers of a contemporary musical drama, *Metamorphosis*, staged by teacher trainees from the Sarawak Branch of the Malaysian Institute of Teacher Education at the Miri Library. The data collection procedure included interviews and feedback forms. Data analysis was done using the “Three Step Writing Method” based on phenomenology. The findings indicate that the audience had become more aware of the needs of the students with dyslexia. The performers could identify systemic changes and pedagogical accommodations needed for students with dyslexia. The findings can inform educationists and the community on the need to consider the multilingual nature of the community in promoting advocacy for students with dyslexia.

**KEYWORDS: Advocacy, Multilingual, Dyslexia, Musical, Drama**

## **Introduction**

In a multicultural community, advocates for educational delivery sensitive to the needs of students with dyslexia need to look into alternative language strategies to reach hearts and minds. This study documents the process of using a multilingual approach as a strategy to develop advocacy skills in teacher trainees in the Sarawak Branch of the Institute of Teacher Education in Miri.

### ***The need for advocacy***

Students with dyslexia require accommodations in learning environments and in testing procedures. These were not within the realm of my personal experience until I assisted in the development of literacy skills for a boy who was dyslexic. I will use the pseudonym Joe to refer to him.

My journey began when I met Joe who attended my weekend art class which I held regularly as art was my hobby and I enjoyed grooming young artists. I noticed that he was speaking English at an advanced level and was above average in general knowledge. Yet his mother told me that he could not read. I noticed that he could use a mobile phone. I also observed that he could read materials on websites. He was digesting information from the National Geographic programme on television. Yet, when it came to pen and paper tests, he could not read and write. I started to look into the educational modifications needed for a student with dyslexia. I had read about this as a lecturer teaching teacher trainees how to manage students with dyslexia. Meeting Joe opened my eyes in ways that books did not. I wanted to help him to have a reasonable chance at taking tests which had been modified to suit his needs. He needed tests that were conducted in a different manner. He needed a reader and a writer.

With the insights I acquired regarding the challenges that his mother faced in appealing for modifications in the delivery of education to her son, I crafted a path for creating awareness for students who were misunderstood because of their difficulties in recognizing words and in writing. This included the performance of a musical drama entitled “Metamorphosis”.

### ***Why use different languages?***

As a teacher trainer I wanted to train the teacher trainees to become advocates for students with special needs. I chose to develop this through a musical drama where we infused the multilingual nature of the community. My rationale for doing this was that the audience would be able to feel the message more deeply. As I proceeded to train the team I discovered that the multilingual aspect of the performance had an impact on the team. They bonded well and were moved by parts of the musical where the characters were expressing their hopes and pain in different languages.

### **The research question**

I was guided by the following question in this study:

*How can I use the multilingual nature of the community to develop advocacy skills among teacher trainees?*

With this desire to create awareness that would be the catalyst for change in the support given by the community, families, and teachers, I planned the action research.

### ***The strategy***

With this focus the journey to seek insights to this question went through the following phases:

#### **(a) *Development of the script***

There was a contemporary musical drama competition that was held in October 2011. This competition was held among four branches of the Malaysian Institute of Teacher Education in Sarawak. This competition was in the Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia. I wrote an original musical entitled “Metamorphosis” and infused different languages to have a more authentic effect. This story was built around a boy who was an artist and his father who was a dancer. They were both dyslexic. Thus, I incorporated the idea that dyslexia was a condition that tends to be manifested in males and could be genetic.

As a writer I first visualized the plot in English and wrote the script in English. Two teacher trainees who majored in Special Education translated the script to Bahasa Malaysia. I found the translation to be inappropriate for drama. So I rewrote the script in Bahasa Malaysia, using dramatic linguistic structures.

#### **(b) *Incorporation of English and Hokkien at the climax***

English and Hokkien, a Chinese dialect, were used at a critical conflict in the drama. The father of the girl that the dyslexic boy loves rejects him saying “You are such a hopeless case”. The boy, Anderson, who has not spoken except through contemporary dance, is provoked to utter his first words in the drama: a very firm “Excuse me uncle, I am NOT a HOPELESS, and by doing so he has broken the taboo of Chinese culture: he has answered an elder who is reprimanding him. The father slaps him and shouts furiously in Hokkien: “LU KA IN UA? (You *dare to answer me?*). This violent climax is made more painful by sounds of the father abusing his daughter offstage for befriending the dyslexic boy. Anderson almost gives up hope but regains his vision to be a dancer when his inner self appears and picks him up. The inner self of Anderson is played by an actor dressed in white. He sings in Malay. The song is called “The Garden of Hope”. As he sings,

Anderson dances to show he is determined to be a world class dancer. Finally at centre stage he stares at the audience and states firmly in English: “I AM NOT a HOPELESS CASE.”

(c) *Trilingual feedback forms.*

In 2012, the musical, “Metamorphosis”, was performed in the auditorium of Pustaka Miri at the Miri Library in Sarawak, Malaysia. Announcements were prepared in three languages requesting the audience to complete a feedback form to indicate what they knew about dyslexia before watching the drama and what they had learnt after watching the drama. The Master of Ceremonies was a teacher trainee specializing in Remedial Education and Chinese Language Teaching. She spoke three languages fluently: Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and English. She also assisted in preparing the feedback form in three languages. The feedback forms were distributed to the audience by two groups of trainees who specialized in Chinese Language Pedagogy.

(d) *English synopsis*

An English synopsis was provided for a group of nine international visitors in the audience. This was done upon their request when they had heard that the musical would be staged at the Pustaka Miri.

### ***Scope***

This study was limited to 97 members of the public at a musical drama and eight members of the cast comprising of teacher trainees. The period covered during this study was two years. Six months was allowed to pass before the process of phenomenology was done to revisit the phenomenon.

### **Literature review**

#### ***Action research***

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) assert that action research is linked to social change and social justice. They quote Noffke (1997) who stated that the term “action research” appeared in the 1961 speech by Martin Luther King. Action research is an endeavour to improve ways of learning and evaluation. Action researchers describe the status quo and show how and why we need to change it.

It is important for action research to be made public to be a catalyst for educational transformation. Sen (1999) suggests that this contributes to a greater awareness of human capability. When accounts of action research are read by others, the learning process is multiplied.

It is vital that teachers see themselves as being able to contribute to the practical world. By documenting a story of practice, an educator offers explanations and justifications. This will enrich the intellectual life world. This endeavour to share the steps taken to consciously use multilingualism to develop advocacy skills offers a simple model to encourage the development of events to promote advocacy for students with dyslexia. For example, Hingell (2004) documented how she collaborated with people with disabilities to develop their own capacity for creative work.

### ***Collaboration across borders***

The outreach team comprised of students from different majors. It was interesting to note that many main actors were majoring in Chinese but they spoke mainly in Malay. Putnam (1993) states that students backgrounds will benefit from cooperative learning. The character who spoke Hokkien was in fact a Malay. His ability to speak Hokkien seemed to endear him to his team mates. This highlights the importance of multilingualism in building a team spirit. In addition, a group of international visitors asked for a synopsis in English as they were keen to attend the performance. The international friends also assisted in solving challenges with the props. Here we see English as a medium that facilitated the building of friendship between a local community and international visitors. These visitors were able to provide feedback in English in the spontaneous feedback session after the performance and also in the multilingual feedback forms.

### ***Restructuring schools***

Students with dyslexia need modifications in examinations procedures and pedagogy. Sebba and Ainscow (1996) state that inclusion is conceptualized not as a way of assimilating individual students with identified special educational needs into existing forms of schooling but as a way of restructuring schools to respond positively to all students as individuals. This outreach was aimed at highlighting the need for systemic changes in terms of educational delivery and examination procedures for students with dyslexia.

### ***Vision 2020***

In 1991, Dr Mahathir, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, captured the imagination of the nation when he addressed the Malaysian Business Council and shared his vision of *The Way Forward*. The thrust of policy issues on inclusive education in Malaysia is linked to this vision of a progressive and caring nation now referred to as Vision 2020. Malaysia has participated in international conferences which support the principles of Inclusive Education (Noordin, 1994). Inclusion requires adaptive practices that address the needs of students. It has been recommended that inclusive and adaptive teaching be made a part of all teacher education programmes (Macmullin & Vaz, 1995).

## **Methodology**

This study has adopted a theoretical approach guided by a constructivist research paradigm. The theoretical framework behind this design is interpretivism.

### ***The setting and the participants***

As previously mentioned, the respondents were 97 members of the public who attended the musical drama on 25 February 2012 and eight members of the cast. The audience comprised teachers, education officers, students and parents. Seven members of the audience were visitors from overseas. They came from Canada, New Zealand and France. The cast comprised of teacher trainees from various majors such as Mathematics, Visual Arts, Chinese Language, Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL), Special Education and Remedial Education.

### ***Data collection procedures***

Data collection was done using interviews, observations and feedback forms. Feedback forms were prepared in three languages: English, Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin. Code numbers were used for the respondents for ethical reasons. The audience completed a form to indicate their level of knowledge and interest in dyslexia before the musical. After the musical they completed the tri-lingual feedback form to write what they learnt from the musical. Interviews were conducted in English. Participant observation was used as the researcher was a part of the team.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis was done using colour codes to identify emerging themes. These themes were then categorized and “bracketing” (McKenzie, 1996) was used. Using this technique the reflections and insights of the researcher were written in brackets as the data was being analysed.

The analysis of the data was done using the Three Step Method (Vaz, 1998) devised by. This is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Three step writing method

| Three Step Writing Method |                          |                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                           | Step                     | Activity                                                                                          |
| 1                         | Protocol Writing         | Writing a journal,<br>Writing reflections on interviews,<br>Writing reflections on feedback forms |
| 2                         | Hermeneutic Writing      | Identifying emerging themes                                                                       |
| 3                         | Phenomenological Writing | Revisiting the phenomenon                                                                         |

In Step 1, known as “Protocol Writing”, the raw data were collected in the form of field notes, reflections in journals, reflections on interviews and feedback forms. In Step 2, “Hermeneutic Writing”, the researcher interpreted the data by identifying emerging themes. In Step 3, “Phenomenological Writing”, a period of time is allowed to pass before the phenomenon is revisited for fresh insights. This is the “incubation period”. The insights were presented to a critical friend for further analysis from a different perspective.

### **Findings**

The findings indicate that the use of different languages enabled the outreach project to touch the hearts and minds of the team and the audience. Different languages were used in the proposal, the training, the event and the collection of data.

### ***Strategic use of English***

English was used strategically in the events. The international visitors were given a synopsis of the story in English. The Master of Ceremonies welcomed the audience and gave instructions on the feedback form in three languages. The performance began with a voice speaking in English. English was used by the central character to stress that he was not a hopeless case.

### ***Cultural dimensions of Hokkien***

The use of a single line in Hokkien had a huge impact on the actors and a team of teenage dancers who assisted in the training of the contemporary dances. Reflections of the researcher indicated a need to use English and Hokkien in a Malay musical to touch the hearts and minds of the team and the audience:

“L expresses himself better in English. Only two lines and yet so powerful.”

(Researcher’s Journal. 27 February 2012 )

This refers to the scene where there is a flashback showing Anderson as a teenager being rejected by the father of his friend who brands him as a hopeless case: The father is angered by his determination to defend himself and shouts in Hokkien.

Father: You are such a hopeless case!

Teenage Anderson: Excuse me uncle, I AM NOT A HOPELESS CASE.

Father: (grabs his shirt and slaps him). LU KA IN UA (You *dare to answer?*)

The reaction of the father in Hokkien deepens the dramatic effect. The sociolinguistic impact is that the younger generation is not allowed to answer an adult in a conflict. The journal reflections noted that this episode captured the imagination of the actors and the teenage dancers who helped to train the team in contemporary dance. When the researcher first used Hokkien to demonstrate the scene, the Chinese actors and teenage dancers were taken aback and some commented that it was so “real”. Subsequently, the teenage dancers would often say that that episode was so real and they could feel it. It indicated that they could identify with the dilemma of the teen Anderson who was a talented dancer but considered a hopeless case because he was dyslexic.

### ***Focusing on ability***

Before the opening dance the lights were dimmed and a voice beckons from behind the curtains:

“Welcome to the World of Metamorphosis.

This is a story of boy who is a talented dancer.”

The focus is on ability, not on disability. Thus, the musical opens on a positive note. This leads into the opening dance showing the male Raja Brooke Butterfly learning to fly, assisted by a female Raja Brooke Butterfly. The synopsis given to the audience states that the butterflies are a symbol of hope.

The voice is the voice of the actor who plays the role of Anderson as an adult. This voice then says the same line in Mandarin. This actor was a trainee teacher who was tri-lingual. He was majoring in the teaching of Chinese and yet he acted in a role speaking Bahasa Malaysia fluently. This reflects the reality of the community in Malaysia in this generation. Thus, to promote awareness on the needs of students with dyslexia, a multilingual approach is needed.

### ***Impact on students***

English was used in strategic moments in the performance of the drama. The findings indicated that students in the audience commented primarily on the episode where English was used. This was in the conflict between the central character Anderson, a



dyslexic teenager, and the father of the girl who was sympathetic to him. The father brands him as a “hopeless case”. Anderson walks to the father and states firmly, “Excuse me sir, I AM NOT A HOPELESS CASE”. Findings from the feedback form indicated that teenagers in the audience gave feedback primarily in English. They stated that the musical showed them that everyone has hope and that students who are considered as the scum of society have potential.

### *Pedagogical modifications*

Bahasa Malaysia was used to present the pedagogical modifications needed to address the needs of students with dyslexia. It was communicated through the dialogue between Anderson as an adult with the mathematics teacher. The mathematics teacher complains that Andrew, Anderson’s son, has been failing his tests. Anderson tells the teacher that he can understand his son because he was also like his son when he was in school. This leads to the flashback scene where we see a teenage Anderson being rejected.

### *Colour of paper and size of words*

The adult Anderson tells the teacher that he could read if the paper was blue and the words were large and black. This highlights the modification needed for students with dyslexia. The findings indicated that the educators in the audience noted that they did not know about this issue of colour and size of words.

### *Modifications for exams*

The findings indicate that the audience did not state that they understood the modification needed for exams. This was explained by the adult Anderson to the teacher: that in exams a reader and scripted was needed. This dialogue was in Bahasa Malaysia. This could mean that there was a communication breakdown in the sense that the message was not transmitted to the audience.

### *Art therapy*

Another pedagogical technique that was not understood by the audience was the depiction of Art Therapy as an intervention for dyspraxia. Andrew was shown as having a phobia related to reading the mathematical symbols X and +. This was dramatized in a nightmare where he sees two zombies attacking him. One zombie had the symbol X in red on his black t shirt. Another had the symbol + in red. The symbols look like blood. It dramatizes his confusion between X and +, a condition experienced in dyscalculia. The music used was Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”. The Art Therapy was demonstrated when two Paint Brush Fairies fought the zombies with huge brushes that have ribbons tied to them. This is an adaption of the Chinese Ribbon Dance. After the zombies were defeated, the Paint Brush Fairies taught Andrew to write X and Y by using the giant brushes.

Subsequently, he is freed from his phobia and paints a huge painting of a Raja Brooke Butterfly, indicating his is filled with hope.

It was observed that this episode was successful in creating awareness among the team of teacher trainees regarding Art Therapy as a pedagogical technique. However, feedback from the audience did not indicate that teachers understood this technique. Thus, there was a need to create a follow up activity to provide direct training in Art Therapy. This was done on 25 August 2012.

### *Bahasa Malaysia as a language of advocacy*

As a language of advocacy, Bahasa Malaysia was used to garner the support of teacher trainees from different specializations: Chinese, TESL, Mathematics, Special Education and Remedial Education. As a result of the long period the team spent training in the musical, they became united in their desire to use their talents to help students with dyslexia. The leader of the outreach project was a Mathematics Major who wrote the Working Paper for the project in Bahasa Malaysia. This was needed for the official support from the administration. The working paper to seek the support of Pustaka Miri was written in English.

### *Impact on teacher trainees*

The findings indicate that the teacher trainees were able to identify what was lacking in teacher preparation and they were able to empathize with students with dyslexia. After an incubation period of six months, the actors were interviewed to review the impact on their desire to be advocates for students with dyslexia. The musical was staged two times. One was in the Institute in a contemporary musical drama contest in October 2011. The second time, as an outreach to promote awareness on dyslexia in Pustaka Miri in February 2012. The second project was more challenging as it was strictly a voluntary endeavour. Yet the team members indicated that their sense of fulfilment was higher in the second project because they believed it was important to create awareness on dyslexia in the community.

The TESL trainee who played the role of a dyslexic boy, made a pertinent observation that only teachers who were trained in special education knew about dyslexia. He wanted all teachers to be trained in pedagogy related to students with dyslexia. He suggested that the Education Department should have a subject on dyslexia that must be taken by all teachers in the teacher training curriculum. This indicated that he could visualize systemic changes that were needed for advocacy.

The teacher trainee majoring in Chinese Education, who played the role of teenage Anderson, said that he was like the character in the drama. He was keen on drawing when he was ten but his interest was nipped in the bud by his mother who said that drawing

would not bear fruit. He cast that interest aside. When he was fifteen he started to dance and that made the difference. He had taken great pains to understand the feelings of someone with dyslexia. He crafted the choreography to show hope, despair and determination. His artistic achievement was recognized when he won the award for “Best Choreography” in the Contemporary Musical Drama Contest. What did he learn about teaching a student who has dyslexia? He replied that he would use drama:

“It would make it fun. Drama helps students to talk, to express themselves”  
(LYW. 12.55 pm 5 September 2012)

What struck him most about students with dyslexia?

“Their imagination. They have a very strong imagination”  
(LYW. 12.55 pm September 2012)

This indicated that the identification of the cast with the characters who have dyslexia made them more aware of how to advocate for the needs of students with dyslexia.

## Discussion

A multilingual approach coupled with innovative events can stimulate public discussion on the needs of students with dyslexia. Advocates also need to seek the support of administrators to identify systemic changes that take into consideration the needs of students with dyslexia. Let us not forget that dyslexia can be an impediment even in the Secondary School as it is not a temporary condition. How can a Principal plan ahead to put into place a pro – active strategy to address this need? This is our 3I Team Strategy (3I) : 1 IDENTIFY 2 INPUT 3 INSTRUCT. This strategy is elaborated in the Table 2.

Table 2, 3I Team strategy

| No | Step     | Action                                                                                |
|----|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Identify | Identify students with learning issues at the beginning of the year                   |
| 2  | Input    | Input from experts                                                                    |
| 3  | Instruct | Instruct teachers to carry out intervention efforts with students with learning needs |

This strategy is a guide on actions that an administrator can initiate to mobilize the whole school to translate advocacy into action for the learning needs of students with dyslexia. No doubt without the political will of the administrator, the team will not be able to move systematically to take into consideration the educational modifications that are needed by perception problems caused by dyslexia. Indeed, administrators can set into motion a modified examination procedure for students with dyslexia. These initiatives need to be done with the support of experts in dyslexia. Clearly, administrators have a key role to play in documenting good practices in teaching and in examination procedures for students with dyslexia, particularly in relation to public examinations and school-based examinations. In fact, school-based examinations provide an avenue for administrators to trial alternative examination procedures for students with dyslexia. In this case, educators on site need to be the movers and shakers.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Students with dyslexia are misunderstood as being low achievers as they are not able to read exam papers. Specific modifications in exam procedures are needed. This can be a reality if teachers in the field, beginning teachers, the policy makers, parents, administrators and the community become advocates for the students with dyslexia. A multilingual approach can reach a cross section of people in our diverse community. Teenagers are now equipped with the skills to assist in advocacy. Teenagers can use their skills in digital social networking to create awareness for students with dyslexia in the virtual world. Administrators can initiate proactive programmes using the *3I Team Strategy* to mobilize teachers to support students with dyslexia.

The use of different languages is a strategy to engage the multicultural cast and audience. The findings can be used to inform educators regarding the need for advocacy and how to collaborate with people from different backgrounds towards this goal. A musical is an event that can draw people from different backgrounds. Thus, it has the potential for promoting advocacy to parents, teachers, education officers, students and the general public. Using a multilingual approach would train the teacher trainees to capitalise on the multicultural nature of the community in advocacy.

### **References**

- Hingell, W. (2004) Final Report. Birmingham. Disability West Midlands.
- MacMullin, C., & Vaz, M.A. (1995). International cooperation for inclusion. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 19(2), 16-29.
- McKenzie, S. (1996). *An interpretive study of quality of life for people who have young children with disabilities*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Flinders
- Vaz, M.A., & Raja, M. (2013). *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, Vol. 9(2), pp. 36-48.

University of South Australia.

- McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2006). All you need to know about action research. London: Sage.
- Noordin, Tan Sri Datuk Dr Wan Mohd Zahid Bin Mohd, (1994). Inclusive education: Integral to the education system. Keynote address, first national workshop in inclusive education. Schools division, Ministry of Education, Malaysia, Langkawi, 7-10 June 1994.
- Noffke, S. (1997). Themes and tensions in US action research: Towards historical analysis. In S. Hollingworth (Ed.), *International action research: A casebook for educational reform* (pp. 2-16). London. Falmer Press.
- Putnam, J. (1993). Cooperative learning and strategies for inclusion. Baltimore: Brookes.
- Sebba, J. & Ainscow, M. ( 1996 ). International developments in inclusive schooling: Mapping the issues. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(1), 5-18.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development of freedom*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Vaz, M.A. (1998) An interpretive study of school and classroom practices that support the inclusion of students with special needs in schools in Adelaide. Unpublished master's dissertation. Flinders University of South Australia.