

**Universiti Teknologi MARA**

**The Influence of Ethnic Background on Students'  
Interest in Learning Literature: A Comparison  
between the Malays and the Chinese**

**Noorul Huda bt Mohd Dimyati**

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## Abstract

The issue of ethnicity has often been discussed in Malaysian education. The performances of different races have often been compared. Questions such as why one group does better than the other and what measures should be taken to close the gap often crop up.

This study is a comparative study of two major ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Malays and the Chinese. It attempts to investigate the influence of ethnic background on students' interest in learning literature.

Based on the qualitative and quantitative methods a survey was carried out in a secondary school in Pelabohan Klang, Selangor with a sample of Chinese and Malay students and their parents.

The findings show that there is no significant difference in students' attitude towards literature based on ethnicity. The responses to all the questions by the students show that none of the items has a statistical significance of 0.05 or better. However, the result shows some difference in attitudes among parents pertaining to the encouragement and motivation of their children. There are two items namely *Learning literature is a waste of time* and *I encourage my children to read English stories and novels* that show a statistical significance at 0.04 and 0.01 level.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction to the Study**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> February 2000, a directive in the form of a circular was issued by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to all State Education Directors. The circular informed all secondary schools in Malaysia about the newly introduced Literature component in the National English Syllabus, which is compulsory for all students in secondary schools.

The objective of introducing Literature as a component is to inculcate reading habits among students and also to upgrade the level of English proficiency and competency. Apart from enhancing proficiency in English, the idea of the Literature Component is to contribute to personal development and character building through the study of prescribed literary texts. It is hoped that it will also widen students' outlook through reading about other cultures.

Teaching literature may also enable students to understand and analyse literary ideas, linguistic structures and styles, figures of speech and rhetoric. It is hoped that students will also be able to unconsciously absorb linguistic knowledge, develop their cultural capacity, expressive capabilities and even improve their reading speed.

Kjeldsen (1992) in Brumfit and Benton (1995) states that one of the aims of teaching English Language and literature is to develop students' awareness of language in general and their understanding of connection between language and culture.

During the 1960s and 1970s, literature in English was a relatively popular subject among English-medium students in Malaysia. However, after the change of the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1970, there was a drastic drop in the

number of students who registered for literature in English (Malachi, 1992) in Brumfit and Benton (1995). This was probably because the standard of English was declining steadily in Malaysian schools. The 2002 SPM results for example, showed a decline in the English Language subject which caused a great concern not only among academicians and the Ministry of Education but had also become a national issue (New Straits Times-30 June 2003). The introduction of Science and Mathematics in English into the Malaysian School curriculum recently, as an effort to raise the standard of English is also an indicator of the decline of English in Malaysia. The number of unemployed graduates is also increasing partly due to their handicap in the English language.

The English Language syllabus in Malaysian National Secondary Schools did not have any literature component until 1990, when literature in English was incorporated as part of the English language programme beginning with the lower secondary school. The literature in English in the upper secondary level was an optional subject and was studied for examination purposes (Brumfit and Benton 1995). More and more teachers and students tend to shy away from literature in English (Abdul Ghani and Mukundan 2000).

In the newly introduced Malaysian literature component programme, which was implemented in the year 2000, students are required to study texts from three genres as described below:

Form 1	:	three short stories and three poems (A compilation)
Form 2	:	one novel from three options
Form 3	:	one novel from three options
Form 4 & 5	:	one novel from three options five short stories and six poems ( a compilation)