

Students' Attitudes and Their Academic Performance in Nationhood Education

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Abstract

The main goal of the nationhood education is to instill the sense of loyalty and passion into the nation. In a Malaysian context, several academic subjects at higher education such as Malaysian Studies, Ethnic Relations and National Language have been implemented in order to achieve the goal. Malaysian Study is one of the compulsory courses offered by all private universities in Malaysia that is intended to educate students with national values, patriotism and belongingness to the country. However, past empirical evidence show that many students have a lack of interest to learn such subject. Therefore, the current study investigated contributing factors to students' academic achievement and also examined students' attitudes towards that subject. Using quantitative approach, the current study categorized four main factors namely the suitability and interest in syllabus, being active in class, early preparation and revision, types of enjoyable activities, interest in teaching aids and good class attendance. Using questionnaires and SPSS software as the main tools in this study, the mean score, frequency and percentage were obtained. It is concluded statistically from this study that students' perception of their lecturers play a significant role in determining their learning outcomes in Malaysian Studies, while the lecturers are of the opinion that learning environment is a factor which contributes significantly to the students' achievement in this subject. The current study suggests that the teachers build upon excellent rapport with students and create an attractive and enjoyable environment to get the students to dynamically involve in the classroom activities and learn the Malaysian Studies enthusiastically and efficiently.

Keywords: Malaysian studies, nationhood, interests, teaching aids, learning environment, academic performance

1. Introduction

Nationhood education is the main priorities by the government all over the world. In the United Kingdom and Australia for instance, nationhood education is recommended to be part of national school curriculum (McKenzie, 1993). In Indonesia, nationhood education is embedded in the official philosophical foundation known as *pancasila*. In a Malaysian context, the importance of nationhood education can be seen in the national philosophy known as *rukunegara* and the Constitutional Law. Nationhood education "is important not only for its effects on politics and government, but also in relation to community and voluntary activities, and social and international harmony (McKenzie, 1993)". One of the common strategies to promote good citizens is via Nationhood and Citizenship Education curriculum either at a school level or higher degree level.

Kerr (2005) surveyed 6400 students from 237 secondary schools and 50 colleges, 238 school and college heads and 876 teachers and college tutors in England where the study found that young peoples' development of citizenship dimensions are influenced by a range of interrelated factors and influences including school, family, peer groups, community, teachers, parents, friends and the educational processes. The study also highlighted possible influences of socio-cultural factors on citizenship dimensions among participants.

2. Students' Attitudes and Academic Achievement in Nationhood Education

In Malaysia, nationhood education curriculum is delivered in several subjects including History, Civic Education, Ethnic Relations, General Studies and Malaysian Studies. The Malaysian Private Higher Education Act 1990 posits that it is compulsory for all students to study and pass the Malaysian Studies subject. Due to this regulation, all students in private universities comprising a total number of 323,787 students (Da, 2007) studied Malaysian Studies subject. Irrespective of the importance of this subject for the country, empirical evidence shows that most students lack interest in studying this subject. Daily experience of dealing and interacting with students revealed that the Malaysian Studies have been given less priority by most students. As a result, most students gained low marks for this subject which simultaneously affects their academic cumulative grade points. Extensive past studies suggest that there is a close relationship between students' attitudes towards academic subject and their overall achievement (Erdogan, Bayram, & Deniz, 2008; Konting, 1990). Literature review on this area reveals that there are two main contributing factors to students' academic achievement that are psychological and sociological factors. Psychological factors refer to the internal elements of individual including emotional and cognitive domains, whereas sociological factors refer to external factors such as socio-environment and friendship. However, both factors are inter-related and dependable. Most past studies tended to discuss the subject in a specific context. For instance, a study of academic achievement carried out by Ariffin (2007) focused on individual's learning style and how it affects his/her academic achievement. Although learning style has a close link with a person's personality and intellectual capabilities, the selection of learning styles is also influenced by environmental factors such as educational support provided by peers and teachers. Although previous studies found that there is a positive relationship between student's interest in academic subject and its performance (Arham, Mesir & Mohammad, 2006; Zainudin et al., 2007), classroom environment and their existing knowledge on the particular subjects also play major roles (Rhoda et al., 2011). According to Popham (2005), students' attitudes or interests should be enormously important to educators, because affective dispositions are powerful predictors of students' subsequent behaviour. In a related study, Erdogan, Bayram, Deniz (2008) found that there is a positive relationship between students' attitudes towards modern learning technologies and their academic achievement. Academic achievement increases with the use of modern technologies positively. There is a strong association between individuals' attitudes towards education and their academic performance and commitment. Students who have negative attitudes towards education activities are found to exhibit challenging behaviour including anti-social and off-task behaviour (Awang, Jindal-Snape & Barber, 2013). Ming, Ling and Jaafar (2011) found that streaming in education has a close relationship with students' academic achievement. They also found that students from science classes are more positive about academic performance compared to other students. It should be noted that the current study was carried out in Malaysia where most students are streamed according to their academic achievement. Previous research revealed that there is a link between academic achievement and socio-economic status (Ghazali, 2008). Living in poor and slum areas are found to contribute to the low academic achievement among students. Most low achievers also are from poor families (Farooq, Chaundhry & Berhanu, 2011).

3. Objectives of the Study

This study investigated university students' attitudes towards nationhood and citizenship education in Malaysia. Particularly, the study examined the students' attitudes towards nationhood according to genders, ethnicity, origins and language used.

4. Methodology

The study employed the survey method as it is an effective approach to analyse large samples (Konting, 1990). It also allows respondents to indicate their standpoint without being influenced by others (Konting, 1999; Ghaffar, 1999). The respondents were asked to respond to six-point Likert-scale questionnaires where the score of six represents the highest level of agreement, whereas one represents the strongest disagreement. Questionnaire contains two sections that are demographic of respondents and student's attitude items. The questions were designed based on literature on past studies in this area (Kerr, 2005). The questions were then developed and piloted in order to validate the questionnaire. The pilot study was carried out in one of the Malaysian universities. It involved 100 university students where Cronbach Alpha for all items exceeded 0.84, which indicates that they are reliable and valid. The actual survey was conducted after the approval and consent were obtained from universities and respondents. In this study, a number of 839 students and 16 lecturers from 10 universities in Malaysia were randomly selected. Data collected was then analysed using SPSS by focusing on the descriptive statistics.

5. Results and Discussion

Overall data shows that students outnumbered the lecturers in this study. Table 1 shows distribution of respondents according to the roles.

Table 1. Demographic of respondents, by ethnicity and age groups

	Aspect	Lecturers	Students
Ethnicity	Malay	87% (n= 14)	53% (n=442)
	Chinese	13% (n=2)	30% (n=253)
	Indian	0	14% (n=116)
	Eurasia	0	1% (n=6)
Age groups	Less than 20 years	0	29% (n=246)
	20 – 22 years	0	45% (n=377)
	25 – 29 years	19% (n=3)	2% (n=11)
	30 – 34 years	31% (n=5)	0
	35 – 39 years	25% (n=4)	0
	40 – 44 years	19% (n=3)	0
	More than 44 years	6% (n=1)	0

The majority of students were Malay, followed by Chinese, Indian and other ethnics such as natives and Eurasia. The majority of lecturers participated in this study were Malay. Only two Chinese lectures involved in this study. Result shows that most students are at the age of 20-25 years, whereas the majority of lecturers are 30-39 years old. Nearly one-third of students are less than 20 years old. Detailed analyses on respondents' profile are presented below.

5.1 Students' Profiles

The majority of students are from urban areas and most of them have passed the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination. Nearly one-third of them had a diploma in various field of study. Most students in this study reported that they used Malay language as a medium and 42% used English in nationhood education. The majority of students participated in study obtained excellent grades where 46% obtained grade A and 33% obtained grade B for nationhood education subject.

Table 2. Students' profiles

Items		n	%
Origin	Urban	559	66.6
	Rural	173	20.6
	Suburban	107	12.8
Intermediate Language in Malaysian Studies	Malay	443	52.8
	English	349	41.6
	Bilingual	47	5.6
Achievements in Malaysian Studies (grade)	A (excellent)	384	45.8
	B (good)	276	32.9
	C (fair)	71	8.5
	Passed	104	12.4
	Failed	1	0.1
	No information	3	0.4

5.2 Lecturers' Profiles

Most of lecturers participated in this study were identified to be Malay. Most of them have a master's degree. This is consistent with the national higher education policy which is highly concerned about the performance and quality of the lecturers who teach. The majority of lecturers were at the age of 30 -34 years which were Malay and Chinese who had experience in teaching Malaysian Studies more than 5 years.

Table 3 shows that there were three specializations of lecturers involved in this study. Data showed that 43.8% were specialized in Social Sciences including Security Analysis & Strategy, Public Administration, Political Science, Social Science, Sociology & Anthropology and political *Syari'iyah* (Islamic law); whereas 31.3% specialized in Educational Studies.

Table 3. Lecturers' profiles

Item		n	%
Qualification	Master Degree	14	87.5
	Degree	2	12.5
Teaching Experience	1 – 4 years	2	87.5
	5 – 9 years	8	12.5
	10 – 14 years	4	12.5
	More than 15 years	2	50
Teaching Experience of Malaysian Studies	1 – 4 years	6	25
	5 – 9 years	8	12.5
	More than 10 years	2	37.5
Specialization	Social Science	7	43.8
	Communication and Language	4	25
	Education	5	31.3

5.3 Students' Academic Achievement

Table 4 shows that the majority of the Malaysian Studies classes were conducted in Malay language and English Language with 52.8% and 41.6% respectively. Further analysis revealed that the A grade was the highest achievement by the students and followed by B grade.

Table 4. Language used and achievement

Items	Grade	n	%
Achievements in Malaysian Studies (grade)	A	384	45.8
	B	276	32.9
	C	71	8.5
	Passed	104	12.4
	Failed	1	0.1
	No information	3	0.4

5.4 Student's Attitudes towards Nationhood Education

Students agree that by attending every class will help them to master Malaysian Studies, but according to the lecturers, students usually did not like to attend classes and were not punctual for the class. Accordingly, this attitude will affect the ability of mastering the subject. There is insufficient narrative data in this study to explore students' experience in learning that subject. However, past studies in learning motivation shows that several factors that motivate students to engage in lesson actively. For instance, Ahmad et al. (2013) found teachers'

creativity and competency in using textbooks will encourage students' participation in classroom activities. Another study found that positive school ethos and good rapport with teachers are associated with positive behaviour in students (Awang et al, 2013). Past empirical study also demonstrated that joyful learning atmosphere is necessary to attract student attention and commitment in learning (Jablon & Wilkinson, 2006; Wei, Hung, Lee & Chen, 2011). Results of the current study revealed that most students are very fond of the lecturers who were adept at organizing fun activities in class. This statement was also approved by the lecturers. They felt that the use of teaching aids not only strengthen the students' understanding of related concepts, but also provide an effective and fun learning. Unfortunately, students claimed, most of the lecturers do not use teaching aids during the teaching process, thus reducing the interest of students in the subject and consequently the students assume that the contents of Malaysian studies are uninteresting. The use of modern technology including robotic technology (Wei, Hung, Lee & Chen, 2011) and computer technology (Jablon & Wilkinson, 2006) are found to be effective strategies for promoting students' engagement in learning academic subjects. According to the lectures in this study, students respond well if they have fun activities during the lesson. Such activities assist them in attracting students' attention, and also the students would pose more questions to the lecturer. However, it is still unclear in this study what makes students enjoy in learning Nationhood Education. Therefore, an in-depth study exploring students' aspiration on joyful learning is needed.

Generally, students who prepare early and revise often usually obtain good results. However, according to the lecturers, students who did not prepare early, did not review and write notes of the subject may think that Malaysian studies is not an important subject.

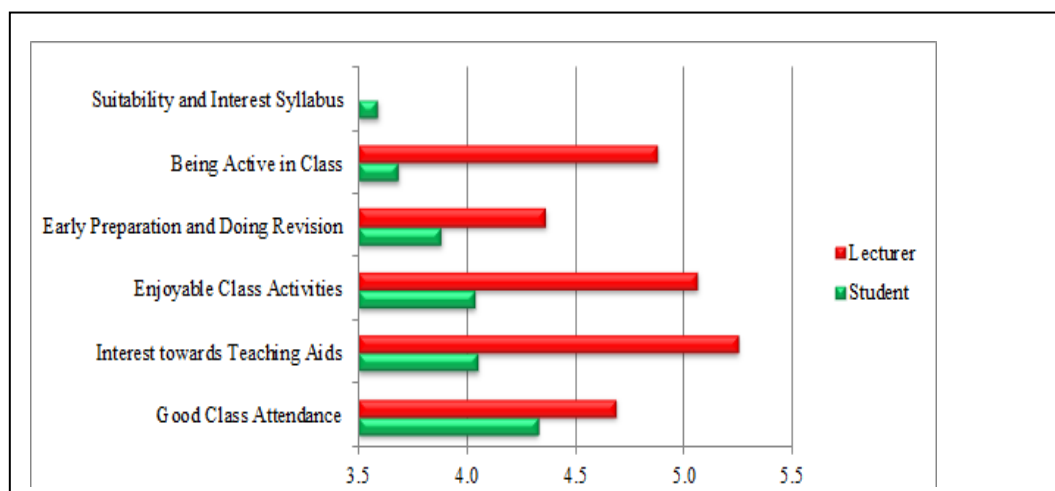


Figure 1. Comparison of Mean Score regarding Students' Attitude.

Figure 1 shows that ineffective and uninteresting teaching methods are the main causes that influence students' interest in Malaysian Studies. The teaching process in classroom should involve two parties between teacher and student. If the teachers only use syllabus, which emphasizes process over aspects of the history of the appreciation and application of two-way interaction, it can cause this loss of focus. In consequence, students will lose interest and consider the subject of history as a burdening subject (Long, 1982). The results show that only around 70% of respondents agree about the syllabus and activities in Malaysian studies.

Due to lack of interest in learning Malaysian studies, most of the respondents were not active in class and did not perform revision and preparation before attending the class.

This can be seen based on the percentage above which are 66.9%, 58.9%, 60.1% and 57.4%. It has happened because respondents always underestimate the value of the subject. Things like this may occur as a result of the attitudes of respondents disdainful of Studies in Malaysia itself. To them, Malaysian Studies is not essential and easy to pass compared to other subjects, as Malaysian Studies subject is more into historical issues and in their view it is boring and uninteresting.

Respondents may not be aware or forget that without a past history then there is development today. History should be studied and understood so that we all will not make the same mistake in the past, such as being colonized by other ethnicity.

Therefore, educators may manipulate the medium to fit the latest technologies and can be accessed at any time (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995) as it is important to attract students to the history of the subject.

5.5 Students' Attitude towards Malaysian Studies

Table 6. T-test of student attitude based on gender

Items	Mean difference	t	p-value
Attend classes in a timely manner	0.080	0.868	0.386
Love to attend every class	0.208	-2.397	0.017*
Interest towards teaching aids	0.081	-0.884	0.377
Suitability and interest syllabus	0.005	-0.057	0.954
Enjoyable class activities	0.013	-0.140	0.888
Being active in class	0.134	-1.459	0.145
Read additional material	0.203	-2.177	0.030*
Doing revision	0.070	-0.731	0.465
Always make own note	0.024	-0.257	0.797
Early preparation	0.117	-1.207	0.228

*Significant level at 0.05

Results indicate that there are no significant differences between genders with regards to the most items except for the item of *love to attend every class* and *read additional material*. Descriptive data on these two items revealed that female students are more positive on attending lecture for nationhood education subject. Female students are more likely to read additional material relating to nationhood education.

Table 7. ANOVA comparison of students' attitudes based on ethnicity, origin, and intermediate language in Malaysian studies

Items	Ethnicity		Origin		Language used	
	F-ratio	p-value	F-ratio	p-value	F-ratio	p-value
Attend classes in a timely manner	23.772	0.000*	5.585	0.040*	33.481	0.000*
Love to attend every class	2.319	0.074	0.595	0.550	7.192	0.001*
Interest towards teaching aids	21.913	0.000*	3.803	0.023*	20.567	0.000*
Suitability and interest syllabus	13.292	0.000*	3.026	0.049*	27.041	0.000*
Enjoyable class activities	19.957	0.000*	3.581	0.028*	16.501	0.000*
Being active in class	17.530	0.000*	4.258	0.014*	25.86	0.000*
Read additional material	15.861	0.000*	6.947	0.001*	18.759	0.000*
Doing revision	15.723	0.000*	6.260	0.002*	22.974	0.000*
Always make own note	15.564	0.000*	7.699	0.000*	24.84	0.000*
Early preparation	13.440	0.000*	2.648	0.071*	12.885	0.000*

*Significant level at 0.05

Analysis of the data using one-way ANOVA technique revealed that the difference was significant at the 0.05 level among ethnic groups on all items except '*love to attend every class*'. The analysis also showed a significant result for rural, urban and suburban students' towards except *love to attend every class* followed by early preparation. However, there was no significant difference among intermediate language in Malaysian Studies.

6. Implication

The research shows that the attitude of students will affect their achievement in learning Malaysian studies. The discussion also shows that student's attitude also affects the classroom learning styles. Therefore, students should be exposed to an interesting environment in class. Comfortable learning environment will create a good attitude and reduce the bad attitudes (Azizi, Halimah & Faizah, 2011). Hence, the lecturers need to identify the real attitude of students and thus be able to find a way to help and attract students for this subject.

7. Conclusion

The current study has highlighted the significant association between students' achievements and their attitudes towards academic subject. Although, overall data suggest that most participants in this has a quite positive attitudes towards Malaysian Studies (one of the nationhood education subjects), there is a big gap between lecturers' and students' perceptions towards how to attract students engagement in Malaysian Study lesson. Results of this study indicated that most students were not active in class activities, poor attendance and exhibited a lack of motivation to study the subject. These might be due to the differences of perceptions between them regarding the most effective strategies. Most lecturers believe that the use of teaching aids would be able to attract students' attentions, however most students highlighted the importance of good class attendance as the most effective way. Differences also occurred between genders as female students are more likely to read more materials. There is no narrative data to explain why male students have a lack of interest to read additional materials. As students from different genders have different preferences, the use of technological-teaching based instruments such as computer technology and internet are crucial. Similarities can be seen through this study that both parties have agreed that the pleasant and enjoyable activities in class influence students' achievement. Therefore, lecturers' creativity and their competency in pedagogical content knowledge are imperative. Teaching and learning for this subject are supposed to be more meaningful if the lecturers integrate many elements either in the subject content or approaches. Indeed, many lecturers in this study pointed out that the effective use of teaching aids motivate students and change their attitude towards learning Malaysian Studies. As students' achievements are associated with their attendance and participation in class activities, organising this academic subject in an attractive manner is vital. Overall, the current study recommends that the lectures should build up an excellent rapport with students as creates the classroom attractive and enjoyable platform for learning Malaysian Studies.

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