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USING ROLE-PLAY WITH LESS ABLE PUPILS IN GEOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Many teachers have voiced their frustration in trying to teach academic geography courses to their less able pupils. Such pupils appear to be lacking in basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy. Their poor concentration span and limited retention of information have made it difficult for teachers to arouse their interest or stimulate sustained efforts (Pick and Renwick, 1984). The prevalent forms of expository teaching found in most classrooms do not meet the need of less able pupils for variety. 'Variety' is the keyword when teaching less able pupils – variety of resources, teaching strategies, content, tasks, locations and in class organisation. The example of the role play described in this article is an attempt to provide classroom teachers with a teaching strategy that will break the monotony of expository teaching.

The Value of Role-play

In a role-play, pupils explore problems by enacting problem situations and then discuss their enactments. Geographical subject matter provides many examples of problem situations particularly with the recent emphasis on man and the environment in the new school syllabus. These include locating a factory, deciding where to migrate or adopting an agricultural innovation.

The following example is based on the Felda Land Development Scheme where shifting cultivators are faced with the decision whether or not to move to a Felda Scheme. In the process of enacting the problem situation, pupils will:

- gain insights and understanding into the difficulties Felda government officials face in persuading villagers to move into new land development schemes.

- explore feelings of shifting cultivators affected by modernisation of agriculture.
- learn specific knowledge about a particular Felda Scheme such as the Jengka Triangle.
- apply their knowledge of shifting cultivation, rubber and oil-palm growing to a discussion of the problem situation.

Information in the textbook about the development of agriculture in the tropics will be made more interesting and meaningful to less able pupils as they explore the roles in the problem situation.

A **ROLE-PLAY** PROBLEM SITUATION

To move or not to move to a Felda Scheme

Ba Rahu and his wife, Empeng, are Senois who have been farming the hillslopes of the steep hills in PERAK for many years. They grow mainly hill padi and cassava as well as bananas, maize and other vegetables. Ba Rahu's methods of farming have remained basically the same as that of his fore-fathers.

Their eldest son, Ba Raji, has the opportunity through the Methodist Mission to be educated in a Methodist school in Kampar and then in an agricultural college. In his studies, he has been exposed to more modern methods of farming. Whilst still at school, he heard of the Federal Government's land development plan. The Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) has cleared forests and opened land for a number of development projects in many parts of Peninsular Malaysia. One such project was the Jengka Triangle project located in the central part of Pahang state.

Felda officials are given the responsibility of persuading families to join the land-development project. These families are needed to look after the crops planted by Felda. Ba Raji contacted a Federal official, Ali, to find out more about the Scheme. They both decided to talk to Ba Raji's father and the village headman to try and persuade the villagers to move to one of Felda's schemes in the Jengka triangle.

The Procedures in a Role-play Exercise

Fannie and George Shaftel (1967) have outlined the following procedures in a role-playing exercise.

| | Phases | Activity |
|----|-------------------------|---|
| 1. | Warm up the group | Introduce the problem Make the problem explicit Interpret the problem-story Explain role playing |
| 2. | Select the participants | Analyse roles Choose role-players |
| 3. | Set the stage | Set line of action Restate roles Get inside the problem situation |
| 4. | Prepare the observers | Decide what to look for Assign observation tasks |
| 5. | Enact | Begin role-play Maintain role-play Break role-play |

In a role-playing exercise, some pupils will be given the responsibility of putting themselves in the shoes of the characters of the problem story. The rest of the class not playing roles will also be actively involved. They will be assigned observation tasks.

Tasks For Role-Players

Five pupils will be required to play the roles of Ba Rahu, Empeng, Ba Raji, Ali and the village headman. Their task is to come together for a discussion about whether or not they should move to one of Felda's schemes in the Jengka Triangle. A map and additional notes are provided as input for the discussion. (Appendix 1)

The following questions will serve to assist the role-players in their discussion.

- * What reasons would Ba Raji and Ali give to support the move to the Felda Scheme?
- * Will Ba Rahu and Empeng be keen on moving? Why?
- * What final decision will be made by the village headman and what reasons will the village headman give to support his decision.

Tasks For Observers

The rest of the class can be divided into five groups, each group assigned to observe one role-player. Their task in observation is to list down the ideas raised by each role-player as well as describe the feelings of the actors.

Tasks For The Classroom Teacher

The role of the teacher in this exercise is to introduce the problem-story and ensure that pupils understand what they are assigned to do. The success of the enactment depends a great deal on how well pupils are briefed about their roles and their willingness to put themselves into the shoes of the actors. More

important though is the discussion after the enactment where the teacher's task is to discuss the major points provided in the enactment by each role player and encourage thought on how and why decisions were made and how they might affect different groups of people.

Conclusion

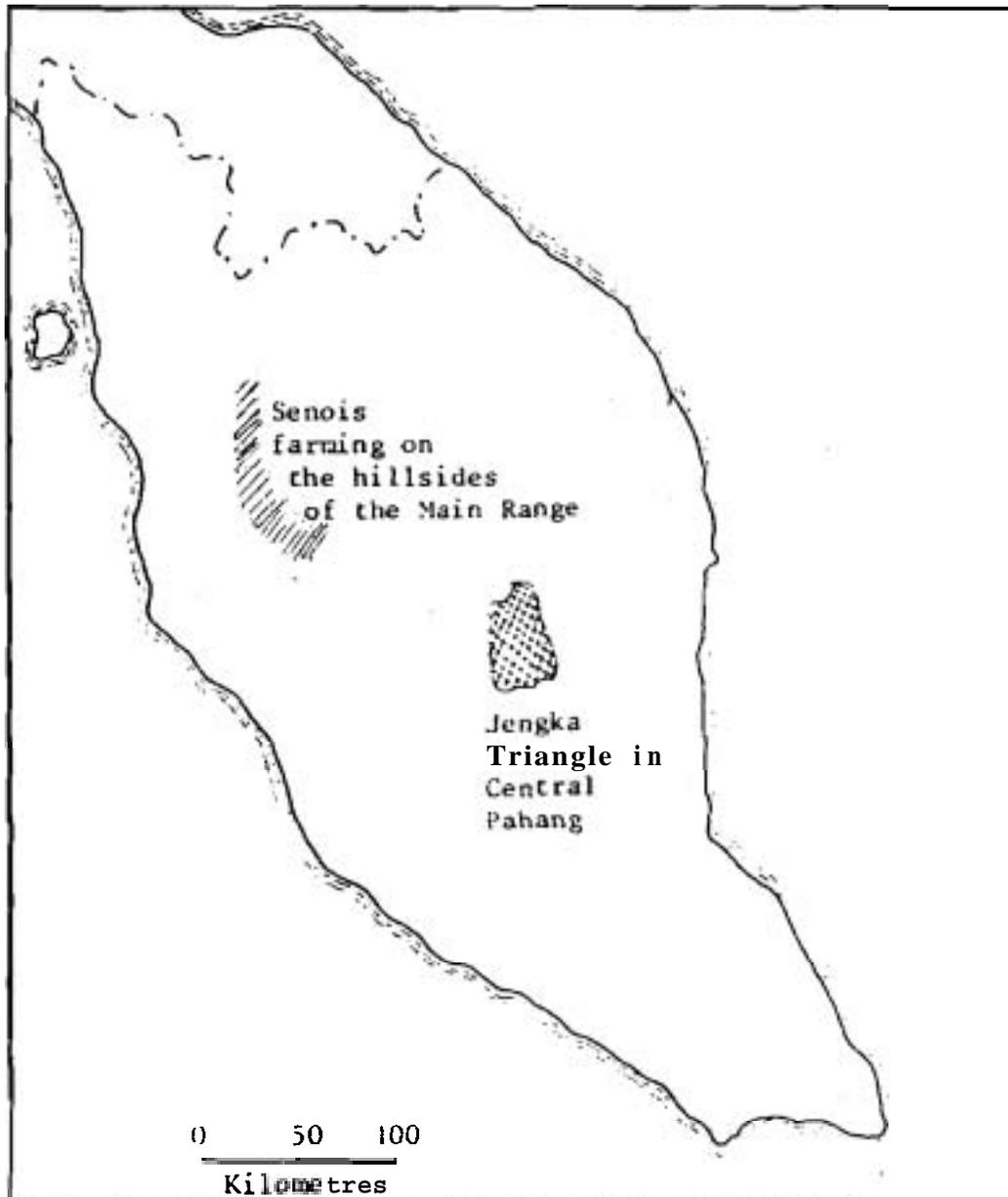
There is a feeling among teachers that role-play is better suited for the more able pupils. Perhaps this is because some role-plays are quite complicated and pupils need to understand complex procedures or a large amount of background materials. But role-play need not be complicated. The example provided in this article requires basic knowledge of Felda land development schemes, shifting cultivation, oil-palm and rubber growing, much of which are in their school text. The materials are carefully planned and structured and additional background notes are provided to guide the pupils. This role-play exercise provides a channel where the learning of basic geographical knowledge and ideas can become more meaningful and interesting.

References

- Pick, William and Renwick, Malcolm (1984). *Teaching the less able student in Geography* in Fien (ed), *The Geography Teacher's Guide to the Classroom*. Melbourne, Macmillan.
- Weil, Marsha and Joyce, Bruce (1978), *Social Models of Teaching*. New Jersey, Prentice-Hall.

Appendix One

Map for Role-Play Exercise

**Notes on Jengka Triangle** (refer to p 61, Secondary School Geography, 3N, CDIS)

- A Felda project (land development on a regional scale)
- located in central part of Pahang
- S. Pahang flows to the west of the area
- m Area is twice the size of Singapore
- 40,500 ha of oil palm and rubber holdings
- m To house more than 9,000 families