

EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS ON ESL STUDENTS' READING HABITS (MENEROKA PERSEPSI TABIAT MEMBACA DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR ESL)

NORAIEN MANSOR*

Centre for Fundamental and Liberal Education, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Terengganu.

*Corresponding author: aien@umt.edu.my

Abstract: Malaysia is far from a reading society. In order to advance to a society that loves reading, everybody must claim responsibility for spreading good reading habits as early as possible. Students should practice avid and independent reading, parents should provide a reasonable variety of reading materials at home, and teachers need to understand the individual needs of students of diverse backgrounds with varied habits, interests, attitudes and motivations towards reading. Additionally, the government should revise their policy of exam-oriented education which places too much prominence on examinations and not enough on the importance of the reading process. Thus, this study intends to explore perceptions on ESL students' reading habits. The findings revealed that the status of ESL students' reading habits is still bad but it can be enhanced with proper guidance and encouraging activities to motivate students' to enhance their reading skills. Therefore, it is time for the government and the community to strengthen their moves to promote effective reading habits to curb the vital contemporary issue.

Keywords: Reading habits, reading society, motivation, reading skills.

Abstrak: Malaysia masih jauh untuk dilabelkan sebagai masyarakat membaca. Untuk melonjak sebagai masyarakat yang sukakan membaca, tabiat membaca harus disemai dalam diri seawal mungkin. Pelajar perlu menyemai minat membaca di samping peranan ibu bapa dalam menyediakan bahan bacaan yang bersesuaian di rumah. Para guru pula hendaklah memahami kehendak pelajar yang berbeza latar belakang yang semestinya menunjukkan tabiat, minat, sikap dan motivasi berbeza terhadap pembacaan. Justeru, kerajaan seharusnya menyemak semula polisi pendidikan berteraskan peperiksaan yang lebih memberi penekanan kepada peperiksaan berbanding proses pembacaan. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka persepsi tabiat membaca dalam kalangan pelajar ESL. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan kadar tabiat membaca dalam kalangan pelajar ESL adalah masih rendah. Walau bagaimanapun, ia masih dapat ditingkatkan hasil tunjuk ajar yang betul serta menerusi aktiviti yang dapat merangsang motivasi pelajar untuk meningkatkan kemahiran membaca mereka. Kini tibalah masa untuk kerajaan dan masyarakat memperkasa tabiat membaca yang berkesan bagi mendepani isu-isu mutakhir.

Kata kunci: Tabiat membaca, masyarakat membaca, motivasi, kemahiran membaca.

Introduction

It is generally accepted that reading skill is an essential element of learning and through reading, the readers gain new knowledge, obtain current information and have a better understanding of the world around them. Nevertheless, nowadays, reading is a vital contemporary issue discussed by people from all walks of life. Mokotsi (2005) stated that governments, teachers and the community in general all seem to share a genuine concern regarding the need to promote effective reading habits as it is a necessity and a basic tool in

education. Reading habits have contributed significantly to all levels of the education system as they constitute the foundation of knowledge.

In the field of education, it is widely believed that reading builds literacy skills and improves writing (Krashen, 2004). Anderson *et al.* (1988) add that research has shown that students who read more, especially recreationally, perform better on measures of reading comprehension and vocabulary. This research provides evidence that the act of reading itself improves reading performance. Hence, it is important that ESL teachers develop in their students a reading

habit that will endure and produce sustained independent readers.

Malaysian students are inclined to read mostly textbooks as they are compulsory reading materials, and read little of miscellaneous genres. Apart from their great concern over the progress they make in their course work and in preparing for examinations, students tend to confine their reading to textbooks due to the shortage of locally produced non-textbook materials.

Studies have revealed that many school-going children do not read for pleasure as there is not enough free time after doing school homework. Parents also discourage their children from reading for leisure as they consider this a waste of time that could otherwise be spent revising for examinations (Ambigapathy, 1993; Norazit & Fatimah, 1992). Another contention is that there is excessive emphasis on passing examinations among parents, teachers and pupils, and this obsession pushes recreational reading into the background (Doraisamy, *The New Straits Times*, 15 September 1983; Philips & Norazit, *The Sunday Star*, 25 June 1993). It can be noted from the dates of the newspaper articles cited that even after a period of ten years, the situation has not changed much.

Researchers have categorized several factors affecting reading habits under home and family variables, school and teacher variables, intervening variables and reading habits variables, and personal or background variables (Ambigapathy, 1993; Morrow, 1993). A home in which the parents themselves are readers and where there is a good collection of reading materials available is likely to promote positive reading habits and attitudes (Greaney, 1996). Encouragement and involvement in literary activities by family members are also likely to influence the child's self-system and help foster reading habits from young (Stoedt, Amspaugh & Hunt, 1996). A home environment wealthy with books as well as the active involvement of parents in reading activities acts as a powerful catalyst in fostering reading habits among youngsters (Gengatharan, 2004).

Many teachers may still be unaware of the extent of the impact that classroom activities related to teaching reading may have on the students. Greaney (1996) suggests that the emphasis on teaching reading should not focus on skills alone, but also on cultivating favourable reading habits and positive attitudes towards reading. Morrow (1993) warns that "if schools do not deliberately and thoughtfully entice children to read during their early years, the desire and motivation to learn to read and to acquire the reading habit may never develop".

A major problem for many language teachers is a low level of motivation in their students when it comes to reading in the second language. This is especially so if their students have preconceived notions that they do not really need to read in English except for academic purposes. This is certainly the case in Malaysia, where even though students in Malaysia are surrounded by ample reading materials, the majority of students have little motivation to read books in English. Most teachers do not take any initiative to overcome this problem. They are more concerned with finishing the syllabus on time and preparing the students for major examinations. As such, no constructive effort has been truly implemented to encourage Malaysian students to read more material in English to improve their language development and reading ability.

Further, teachers should play their role to instill reading habits among students by providing an assortment of appropriate materials in the classroom. It is crucial to know the ways in which reading habits are formed and how reading habits become manifested in the students' learning process. In order to be a good teacher, one should understand the individual needs of students of diverse backgrounds, with varied habits, interests, attitudes and motivation towards reading. In addition, teachers need to be aware of students' reading attitudes when preparing teaching and learning plans. Careful monitoring can help learners develop a positive attitude towards reading. As English becomes even more important globally with

the advancement of IT and reading is one of the most effective ways to acquire a language, teachers should put more effort into organizing reading programmes and choosing suitable materials to kindle and sustain students' interest in the language (Thangam, 2003).

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted regarding reading trends in Malaysia. Frank Small and Associates (1996) conducted a survey on Malaysians' reading habits and the results indicated that they read an average of two books a year. This fact indicates that reading trends in Malaysia are very dissatisfactory and need to be monitored seriously.

Nine years later, the results of a survey of 60,441 Malaysians in 2005 showed that conditions had not changed: 98% of 10+-year-olds still only read two books a year (StarMag, 2006). This stagnancy is very upsetting, and serious steps should be taken by all parties including teachers, school administrators and also parents to negate it.

Previous studies (Siti Fauzimah: 1994, Agnes: 1997) done on reading show that Malaysian reading habits are largely unsatisfactory. It appears that most of them are minimally aware of the importance of reading yet they do not spend much time on reading-related activities. It is crucial for this negative attitude to be overcome to create an intellectual society, which in turn would better shape the achievement of Vision 2020.

In addition, other studies done on reading patterns of Malaysian students indicate that the habit of reading in English is not widespread. A majority of students read English material purely for academic purposes.

Prof. Atan Long (1984) conducted a similar analysis on reading habits and interests in Malaysia. He found that ethnicity and the language used influence the patterns of newspapers, magazines and book readership.

In 1996, Frank Small and associates conducted a survey on Malaysians' reading

habits under the National Library. It was discovered that out of 14.9 million people (more than three-quarters of the population) aged 10 years and above, most of them read only one or two books per year. 30 minutes per week was the average time that Malaysians spent on reading newspapers, 2 hour per week on reading magazines and books, and an hour and a half on reading comics. Overall, it can be concluded that Malaysians' reading habit is still less than satisfactory.

Methodology

This study involves 10 subjects, English language teachers teaching form six students from five secondary schools in Kuala Terengganu. They were interviewed using interview questions adapted from Creswell (2005). The questions focused to elicit their opinions on the performance of form six students' reading habits in their school and the impact on ESL students' performance as well as their suggestions to improve students' reading habits.

Results and Discussion

The data from this study revealed that the reading habits amongst form six students at five schools in Kuala Terengganu were bad when 90% of the respondents involved in the interview described as "Bad" and "Poor" from the question *Can you describe your opinions on form six students' reading habits? Is it bad or good?* The extracts below strengthen their opinions:

- R2: *From their answers during examinations, we found out the students do not read much.*
- R3: *A few students hardly read a book a year.*
- R6: *In my opinion, the form six students in this school do not consider reading as an enjoyable activity*
- R7: *Only a few students take the initiative to read English materials. The rest just depend on the teacher.*
- R9: *When they were given reading comprehension questions, they didn't*

really read the paragraph / passage to get the correct answers.

R10: *...they are not interested to buy books and other reading materials in English.*

Therefore teachers need to encourage their students to read materials such as newspapers, magazines, story books and other reading materials as well as encourage them to allocate certain time to go to the library. Students should be exposed to reading materials all the time, especially when they are in the classroom. Further, by providing educational English magazines and newspapers is one of the ways to encourage them to read besides conducting more activities on reading e.g Newspaper In Education, book review, etc. It is parallel to the opinions by the respondents below:

R9: *Give them reading passages that relate to their interest when we go through the passage to their schemata @ background knowledge.*

Give them simple and interesting reading passages at first to attract their interest.

R10: *In class, I've tried to loving them to the public library and forced them to be at English section. That activity is fallowed by a report that they should present to the teacher. Other then that, I've bought on my own to be used in class. Newspaper writing is done. At least, they have to read before they carry out the class activity.*

All the respondents agreed with the statement that "Reading habits can improve students' performance in ESL classroom" as reading can help students improve their language, enrich their vocabulary and widen their knowledge. *"When they love reading, it will enrich their vocabulary. They will learn new words. Unconsciously, they will learn the way of writing such as sentence structure and grammar. When they find unfamiliar words, they will guess them from the context (based on the sentences/ phrases before and after the words). If they still couldn't figure out the meaning, they will look for the meaning in the dictionary. Thus, they will improve their vocabulary. Some of course*

will ask their teachers / friends (Respondent 9). Other respondents agreed due to several reasons as below:

R1: *Yes. I agree because they are able to enrich their vocabulary and learn the sentence structures.*

Students are able to learn the tenses indirectly and reading would influence them to write better as well.

R5: *Of course because through reading, their knowledge will be improved.*

We could see the difference between students who read and don't in terms of general knowledge and current issues.

R6: *Agree. Reading is the best way to learn about English sentence structures and to enrich English vocabulary. By reading out loud, the students can learn to pronounce words correctly while practising on the stress and intonation at the same time.*

Students do not have any other means to learn English as they rarely converse in English (especially in this area).

Suggestions on how to improve students' reading habits were proposed by the respondents such as reading aloud to expose students to pronounce the words correctly and accurately and provide them with newspapers so that a lot of activities using newspapers as aids can be carried out. As for reading aloud individual or in group should be done daily in class in order to ensure that students know how to pronounce it accurately. Thus, they are able to understand better when they listen to others who use the same language.

More importantly, a teacher must cultivate the awareness of the importance of reading among students and carry out a lot of reading activities and programmes in and outside the classrooms. Further, teachers need to instill self-motivation among the students so that they are interested in reading as well as vary the activities to ensure the students enjoy learning reading component. Respondents 8, 9 and 10 suggested

a few recommendations as below:

R8: *Prepare a set of questions before reading any reading materials.*

1. *Identify the subject matter*
 2. *What is the main discussion/being discussed*
 3. *What is the topic of the text given.*
- Learn more about the skills in reading –(Skimming and scanning, Extracting specific information).*

R9: *Ask them to write a synopsis. Reading materials should have graphics (colourful perhaps).*

MUET reading texts / passages on the whole is not up to most Form 6 students in Terengganu. Thus, they have little interest to read the passages.

R10: *Give/find out any reading materials which one very close to their background / experience. Ask them to have an exchange of reading materials. Prepare some goodies for those who read many books / the best reader?*

Keep in touch with students parents. Their reading habit is actually inherited from their parents.

Conclusion

Malaysia is far from a reading society. In order to advance to a society that loves reading, everybody must claim responsibility for spreading good reading habits as early as possible. Students should practice avid and independent reading, parents should provide a reasonable variety of reading materials at home, and teachers need to understand the individual needs of students of diverse backgrounds with varied habits, interests, attitudes and motivations towards reading.

Additionally, the government should revise their policy of exam-oriented education which places too much prominence on examinations and not enough on the importance of the reading process, which many claim to be the downfall of reading habits in Malaysia.

The large network of activities related to the promotion of reading habits in libraries requires the cooperation of all concerned, but with everyone focused on the same goal and with sufficient commitment, success should not be far away. The journey may be long and difficult but the first step has to be made.

References

- Agnes Gnanapragasam. (1997/98). Reading Habits and Interests Among Secondary School Students. A Case Study On Students At SM Seri Puteri, Ipoh, (A Research Project of Master Degree, University Malaya, Faculty of Business and Accountancy, K.L. U.M, 1997/98).
- Ambigapathy, P. (1993). Sociocultural, Socioeconomic and Socio Psychological Correlates of Reading Reluctancy of University Students in Malaysia. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation), Kuala Lumpur: National University of Malaysia.
- Anderson, R. C., Wilson, P. T., & Fielding, L. G. (1988). Growth in Reading and How Children Spend their Time Outside of School. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 23. 285-303.
- Atan bin Long, *et al.* (1984). A Survey on the Reading Habits and Interests of Malaysian People, KL: DBP.
- Doraisamy, J. (1983, September 15). Books and Bookworms: Is Reading a Dying Art in Malaysia? *The New Straits Times*.
- Frank Small & Associates (1996). Study of Reading Habits in Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur: Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.
- Gengatharan A/L Das. (2004). A Study of Factors Affecting the Reading Habits and Reading Interests in English of Year Five Pupils of Selected Schools in Penang. Masters of Education, University Malaya.
- Greaney, V. (1986, April). Parental Influences on Reading. *The Reading Teacher*. Pp. 813-817.

- Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Westport., CT: Libraries Unlimited, Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Mokatsi, R. (2005.) Sharing Resources-how Library Networks can Help Reach Education Goals. East African Book Development Association. A Research Paper Looking at Libraries in the Developing World. Commission by book Aids International.
- Morrow, L. M. (1993). Literacy Development in the Early Years – Helping Children Read and Write (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Norazit, L & Fatimah, H. (1992). Barriers to Reading: An Investigation of Why the Reading Habit has not caught on among Malaysian School Children. Paper presented at the International Conference, 'Literature in Asian Societies'. 3-5 July 1992. Kuala Lumpur: Lanuage Centre, University Malaya.
- Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Oxford: The Bath Press.
- Stoodt, B. D. , Amspaugh, L. B., & Hunt, J. (1996). *Children's Literature: Discovery for a Lifetime*. Scottsdale: Gorsuch Scarisbrick Publishers.
- Thangam, A/P Raja Gopal (2003). Motivating Reading Habits Among Students through An Extensive Reading Programme, Masters of Education, University Malaya.