

Rethinking English Language Reading Learner Resources in Terengganuan Schools

Towards strategies for establishing an extensive reading habit in Malaysian students

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Abstract

Research findings have long indicated a strong direct correlation between an extensive reading habit and sound education. An adequate availability of reading matter for young learners of reading is essential in order to establish a reading habit and thus foster an active interest in reading as an activity that enhances the learner's social, emotional and educational development. Research conducted in Kuala Terengganu over 2011 and 2012 to discover the extent to which extent adequate English language reading material is available to learners of reading indicates a strong need of new measures to ensure availability of English language reading materials in primary schools.

Two plans of attack on this pressing problem are outlined here. The first strategy involves accessing outside sources of English language reading materials, primarily sourcing from book clubs that make inexpensive children's literature available to students through reliable distribution processes. The second strategy involves school teachers leading their students through the process of writing their own reading material to be shared with fellow learners. Both of these strategies follow the thread of learners becoming more personally responsible for their own education in authentic learning environments.

These strategies allow teachers of English reading to help young learners acquire skills for reading authentic materials that encourage lifelong learning and continuous improvement in English language that will empower this next generation of learners and leaders to achieve Malaysia's educational goals.

Further questions related to this research are explored.

Introduction

This research and paper were prepared to present at the 2012 MELTA conference in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.

The reading habit is readily observed to go hand in hand with a culture of exploration of the reader's environment both local and global. It is widely observed that reading for pleasure produces in the reader a hunger for learning while at the same time providing the reader with the very means of learning. While it is arguable that students best learn a language largely through speaking and listening, reading remains the main vehicle for knowledge input which the student can digest information and form a comprehensive world view. Even with advances in technology such as web search, email and blogging, reading remains the key to gaining knowledge.

The authors are concerned here with the availability of reading materials to the Malaysian student. By whatever means available it is imperative that Malaysian students have available to them reading material with which to feed their appetite for learning, and to sharpen their ability to receive it.

The context of research contributing to this paper is the Malaysian state of Terengganu, and in particular the primary schools of the state capital Kuala Terengganu. The authors are employed at the Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Dato' Razali Ismail (IPGKDRI) in teacher education. This research stemmed from observations during practicum visits that students did not seem to be exposed to English language reading material, and that students did not seem to read habitually for pleasure. Ensuing research involved systematic recording of such observations, interviews with school principals and teachers, plus library questionnaires received back from 30 local schools, most of which were primary schools. The aim of this research was to establish quantitative and qualitative data from Terengganuan schools to confirm the suspicion that appropriate reading matter was in short supply.

A question for further study is whether trends discovered in Terengganu are reflected in other Malaysian states. It is suspected that the situation is less dire on the western coast where more native English speakers live and more English is spoken by Malaysians.

Literature Review

A direct correlation between extensive reading habits and positive progress in language proficiency among Cantonese-speaking learners of English language is revealed in a longitudinal research by Tsang (1995) at the City University of Hong Kong. Interestingly, results indicate that greater English proficiency extends across the domains of both reading and writing even when compared with a control group that received extra tuition which involved extra writing activity; it was shown in this study that writing proficiency was improved more by extensive reading activity than by intensive writing activity.

Susser & Robb provide an efficient and comprehensive definition of Extensive Reading:

Our working definition of "extensive reading" as a language teaching/learning procedure is that it is reading (a) of large quantities of material or long texts; (b) for global or general understanding; (c) with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. Further, because (d) reading is individualized, with students choosing the books they want to read, (e) the books are not discussed in class. (Susser & Robb 1990 2.2)

Susser & Robb further draw a sharp distinction between the traditional teaching of discrete "intensive" reading comprehension skills and the more globally interesting and pleasurable "extensive" reading.

The literature presents many arguments for the use of authentic materials in teaching Foreign Language reading (e.g., Allen et al., 1988, p. 163, 170-71; Byrnes, 1987, p. 183), including some evidence that learners prefer them to commercial materials (Henner-Stanchina, 1985, p. 92).

Bell (1998) presents ten beneficial flow-on consequences of extensive reading following his analysis of experimental research into extensive reading in Sanaa', Yemen. These include improvements in reading, writing, general proficiency in English, and improved affect for literacy learning.

Bell affirms Davis (1995:329) in his assertion that Extensive reading programs should be "without the pressures of testing or marks". The notion is expressed that an extensive reading program is best conducted with a stated procedural structure, typically involving teacher-student interviews to ascertain progress, book reports and teachers reading orally to the class to maximize student engagement and pleasure.

Weaver in Heinemann (1996) draws strong connections between extensive reading and the Whole language approach to the learning of English; they share commonalities within the spheres of learner autonomy, flexibility, and high interest with low anxiety in learning.

Krashen (1987) laid down tenets of effective language learning which were echoed by many enthusiasts of Communicative Method in later years:

The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear.

It is this position of emphasizing student engagement and pleasure in extensive reading, and the use of a “whole language” approach that is addressed in this study of reading habits of Terengganuan primary school students.

English Language Literacy: the Malaysian Challenge

It is universally recognized that Malaysia is an emerging country, shifting steadily from Third World status to First World status. Its government's stated aims include greater involvement with world trade, internal development along Western governmental lines, and the development of world class education systems (Tenth Malaysian Plan 2010).

Much has been written in agreement that English literacy and usage being key to advancement in ITC, economic development, employment, international trade, organized governance, international cooperation and social reform. Malaysia occupies a unique position among the countries of the world in that it is comprised of at least three distinct cultures – Malay, Chinese and Indian. Malaysians of these three extractions co-exist relatively peacefully with commonality of national pride and the national language of *Bahasa Melayu*. Each ethnic sector generally retains its own religious and philosophical beliefs, language, culinary preferences and cultural events and yet tolerates the other's non-compliance.

English language was introduced during British rule, retaining widespread usage after independence in 1963, but gradually diminishing since that time, especially in the eastern states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Johor. Today there is little English heard in the streets and homes of Terengganu where this study was conducted. For whatever reason, English language usage in Malaysia has been declining for many years. The challenge for the Malaysian government is to achieve greater English language proficiency without offending its people's understandable sense of unity and cultural pride.

Solutions To Date

A series of bold initiatives known as the Tenth Malaysian Plan (Economic Planning Unit 2010) have been formulated by the Malaysian government to lift standards of living, family incomes, industry and education. English language literacy figures prominently in the Plan, being recognized as central to all other areas of endeavour. Recognition is given also to the historical and cultural significance of Bahasa Melayu as the distinctive language of the Malaysian states. These twin objectives are being addressed through the *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Memperkukuhkan Penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris* (MBM-MBI) program in teacher education.

English proficiency is being vigorously pursued through increased time allocation for English studies in Malaysian schools, the Teaching English Language and Literacy (TELL) program in schools, the English Language Training Fellows (ELTF) program in five participating *Institut Pendidikan Guru* (Teacher Training Institutes), and the new KSSR syllabus that places renewed importance on student-centred, outcomes-based education which lends itself more productively to increasing student English language proficiency in Malaysian school students. The ELTF and TELL programs aim to improve English language teaching pedagogy in Malaysian schools with a greater emphasis on Communicative Method and engagement of Malaysian students in English language activities that lead to greater English language proficiency.

Laptop computers are being rolled out to Form 3 and Form 5 students across Malaysia in an attempt to increase ICT skills and exposure to research resources for students. This exposure will inevitably lead to greater exposure to English language which is the vehicle for the vast bulk of material available on the internet.

Further Fuel for the English Language Strategy in Malaysia

Similar to the “chicken or the egg” conundrum, it appears that it is presumed in Malaysia that the extensive reading habit will develop across Malaysia as students gain English language proficiency through the above-mentioned strategies. It is the contention of this paper that extensive reading cannot develop in a reading materials vacuum, and that suitable reading material must be easily available to students to encourage them to read extensively. Much has been researched and reported on the valuable contribution to English language proficiency in students who read extensively. There is evidence (Wai-King Tsang 1995) that extensive reading not only increases the student’s reading proficiency, but that it increases “Comprehensible Input” (Krashen 1983) and therefore elevates writing ability. It could be argued by logical extension that this same input should lead to more proficient verbal output.

Research into Terengganuan Schools and Their Reading Material

The need for greater availability of suitable English language reading material in schools in Terengganu was recently discovered by the authors of this paper. Survey results from a sample of (30) primary and secondary schools in Terengganu revealed a singular lack of suitable titles available to students, and a correspondingly poor record of student borrowings of library books. Some schools appeared to have no library and/or no librarian. Although it was revealed that many schools had well-appointed and decorated libraries, it was equally as common that these libraries contained fewer than 500 English language fiction books to service up to 1000 students. Similarly sized schools in Australia contain in excess of 20 000 English language fiction books as well as periodicals. Incidental reports of case studies indicated that Terengganuan students rarely take school library books home to read. Australian primary school students generally compulsorily visit their school library in a scheduled visit once a week and are generally required to borrow library books on a regular basis.

Samples of reading materials available to students in Terengganuan schools were observed to be often mismatched with student interests and cultural norms. Authentic reading material with topical interest for Terengganuan students, and pitched at their reading age, were observed to be in short supply in the survey sample. The few books based on Malaysian culture were typically folk tales with disjointed story-lines and obscure references to mythical characters. The majority of books available were centred on Western themes such as the four seasons, pets, swimming at the beach, playing in the snow, picking wildflowers, life in suburbia and major sporting events; all of these would all be familiar scenes for Western students, and as such, areas of interest that could be expected to attract a student to read on the topic. Food references tended to centre on Western fruit and vegetables, Western cuts of meat and a bread or potato based diet. Little reading material appeared to reflect a Malaysian way of life or correspond to an Asian world view. The view that reading materials observed in Terengganuan schools would offer little interest for Malaysian students appears to be supported by the fact that very few borrowings of library books were in evidence, either from a check of library records or from incidental conversations with teachers, students and parents.

Suggested Strategies to Raise the Status of Reading and English

It is perceived that reading is not valued as a skill or activity in Terengganu. This is the consensus of opinion of lecturers at IPGKDRI and school teachers surveyed in this study. It is also readily observable that English language is very much a minority language in Terengganu. The prominent *lingua franca* is Bahasa Melayu. A variety of Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien) and Subcontinental (Tamil, Hindi) languages can be heard in the streets of Kuala Terengganu as well as the more prevalent and nationally championed Bahasa Melayu.

Two major thrusts are presented here as possible encouragers of reading as a popular activity, and also of English as a gateway to greater and better participation in world education and the benefits that can bring to the nation:

The first is encouragement to booksellers to infiltrate schools with quality reading material. In the survey conducted in this study it was revealed that few booksellers make representations to schools to exhibit their wares, and that “book clubs” are almost unknown in Terengganu, even though they exist in Malaysia. Under this Book Club scheme, many if not all schools in Australia participate in various Book Clubs in which students order low-cost books from a catalogue produced several times per year containing descriptions of books suitable to the chronological and reading ages of students. Schools coordinate collection of money and distribution of books while receiving the benefit of free books according to the total school order. If Terengganuan schools were to promote Book Clubs among their students, their students could find themselves better immersed in a print-rich and English-rich environment, and better situated to appreciate both.

Scholastic Malaysia (www.scholastic.com.my/) is apparently active within Malaysia but not within Terengganu. The reasons for this are not apparent to the researchers. This avenue of providing age-, interest-, and proficiency- appropriate reading materials in Terengganuan schools at no cost to the school appears to be an opportunity well worth taking.

The second is teacher-produced reading material. Readily observed in schools are two types of reading materials: student-produced stories and reports displayed in workbooks and on the back wall of classrooms, and professionally-produced books in the school library. The latter more often than not contains subject matter that is foreign to the student. The former is usually available only to the student, the teacher and selected classmates, and is usually handwritten and often containing spelling and grammatical errors. While these errors are entirely forgivable, they do not stand as a suitable example of error-free well-written text from which others should learn English. Reading handwritten essays is the province of teachers and parents. It is a wasted skill in students. Handwriting is a tool we use almost entirely for personal note-taking. The only reasons that we ask students to hand-write essays are those of convenience and expense. Since the reading of handwriting is so labour-intensive it ceases to be authentic text and is of little use to the student in need of encouragement to read.

Professional-looking presentation in the normal format of digitally printed copy is much easier to read than the large-formatted handwritten version.

Advantages:

When produced digitally, either in a word processing or publishing program such as MS Word or MS Publisher, or hand-drawn then scanned digitally, they are reproducible by simply printing multiple copies that can be bound, stapled or presented in a clear book folder. These soft copies are also shareable by email, or uploaded to a website, or shared via USB drive, and can therefore be shared between teachers in a school, across Malaysia and worldwide. Desktop publishing also gives to the teacher and student their choices of paper, colour, and format. These choices are also alterable during subsequent printings when a different audience or purpose is addressed. These resources can be produced professionally by companies found on the Net (eg on the Mashable website (<http://mashable.com/2009/03/01/publish-book/>) which lists various options for this type of publication.

An item of reading material produced in this way is completely authentic, containing student names, places, events, pictures, and therefore be of high interest and low anxiety (Krashen 1981) for the student to enjoy the best of learning conditions. Especially true of this is a student's own written material prepared by the teacher or a third party for publication with corrected spelling and grammar.

As observed earlier, these publications can be used as an incentive for production of writing. There appears to be a direct connection between an avid reader and excellent writing skills.

Self-produced materials can contain cross-curriculum subject matter under guidance from the teacher with no copyright problems.

These productions involve no library borrowing procedures for classrooms. For the English specialist, a box of such publications can be easily be carried around the school. Alternatively they can be viewed directly from a computer or tablet without being printed at all. A printed and/or digital copy can be given to student and/or parents to be used at home.

They can be printed in large font for younger readers, or smaller font for more proficient readers. Smaller fonts allow for more print per page and therefore a more compact publication.

Possible Disadvantages

The teacher needs to review and correct incorrect English since these publications will serve as models of correct English. Content also needs to be vetted by the teacher. Permissions by parents should be obtained before publishing. Inappropriate sharing needs to be restricted.

Teachers could be tempted to use this material to test students, making them into instruments of torture. The content is important only as an interest-grabber for students. "Low anxiety" should be maintained for the learning of reading and for English.

Production costs need to be taken into account. Desktop-publishing costs as little as Rm1 per booklet, while commercially produced booklets start from around RM18 (eg www.blurb.com).

Durability of materials can be poor unless commercially produced. Laminating can help here.

Both of these strategies necessitate deliberate and active teacher involvement and encouragement. Teachers are key to this push to deliver appropriate English reading material to school students. It is hoped that teachers will be encouraged to utilize these and other methods in their attempts to elevate reading opportunities for their pupils.

Questions for Further Research

Apart from the question posed in the introduction above concerning the extent of the reading material problem across Malaysia rather than just Terengganu, there is another question that is raised by the recently ramped-up introduction of computers and internet access in Malaysian schools. This question pertains to the possible availability of eBooks as a source of reading matter. The rapid spread of popularity of devices such as iPad and Kindle, and the use of computer applications that enable the importation of eBooks onto laptops and desktop computers brings into question the need of printed material for the reading process.

A third question for study is the increasing amount of non-linear text which today's student encounters, especially in the internet, and how this form of text may require different reading lesson presentation incorporating on-screen viewing. What this means for Terengganuan students in particular is that their under-represented but rapidly advancing ITC machinery could be vital for their education. How this technology is introduced, resourced and supported by training will be a major factor in determining students' progress in reading.

A fourth area of research would be a more detailed study of how current reading materials are utilized in schools; whether they are distributed and made available to all students in such a manner as to encourage maximum usage.

Conclusion

Adequate supplies of suitable reading materials for Malaysian primary schools lay within easy reach. Participation in book clubs that offer students individual book orders, and use of self-produced works can help supply such materials. These measures require a proactive approach by teachers and suitable in-service training to empower them for this more innovative approach than that which currently exists in Malaysian school libraries.

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