TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE READING BEHAVIOUR OF PRIMARY ESL LEARNERS IN SJKC CHUNG HUA SEMERA SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT: This study attempts to investigate the reading behaviour of primary ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in SJKC Chung Hua Semera Sarawak through the perspective of their teachers in the ESL classroom. To acquire this, interviews were carried out with the teachers to collect qualitative data. A total of 3 ESL teachers were selected from the school to participate in this study. The analysis of the data reveals that majority of the ESL learners spent most of their time reading by skimming and scanning, identifying keywords, applying one-time reading, non-linear reading, and reading selectively. On the contrary, the ESL learners spent less time reading expansively and comprehensively. Since the English language is the learners' second or third language, they lack confidence and motivation as they face various hindrances in fully understanding and interpreting information in this language. The findings of this study intend to provide a springboard for further researches on the approaches to enhance ESL reading skills. Instructional implications are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: Reading Behaviour, primary, ESL (English as a Second Language), Perspective

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy has been the focus of great deal of work over the past few decades. Illiteracy in an adult is seen as stigma, alienated from society. In the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL), the acquisition of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, are considered fundamentally essential. However, reading is by far one of the most important skills for students to master (Begeny, J. C., Laugle, K. M., Krouse, H. E., Lynn, A. E., Tayrose, M. P., & Stage, S. A., 2010).

Reading is a complex process as it involves processing language messages in written or printed form. Technically termed as a cognitive linguistic process, reading requires an individual to possess the ability to decode, also known as the skill to transform printed words into spoken words. However, an individual can be taught to produce sounds by decoding prints, yet he or she may still not understand what he or she has read, as one of the most important processes in reading entails comprehension. Reading comprehension is known to be a foundational for academic success and an important instructional goal in preschool and primary grades.

The concern over low literacy attainment in English language among Malaysian learners has been investigated quite extensively. One of the main efforts from the Malaysian Education Ministry to alleviate this issue is with the *Malaysia Education Blueprint* 2013-2015 that had been developed in order to strengthen Malaysian students' English Language competency. In this study, the main focus is to explore the reading behaviour of the primary ESL learners in SJKC Chung Hua Semera Sarawak according to the perceptions of

their English language teachers. It is hoped that through this perceptive study, insights to second language reading in young language learners could provide a basis for possible future language teaching and learning enhancement as well as second language learning policy development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language Literacy in Malaysia

According to a survey conducted by the Malaysian National Library in 2005, the literacy rate in Malaysia experienced a decrease, and shed light on the shocking fact that an average Malaysian only read approximately two books in a year.
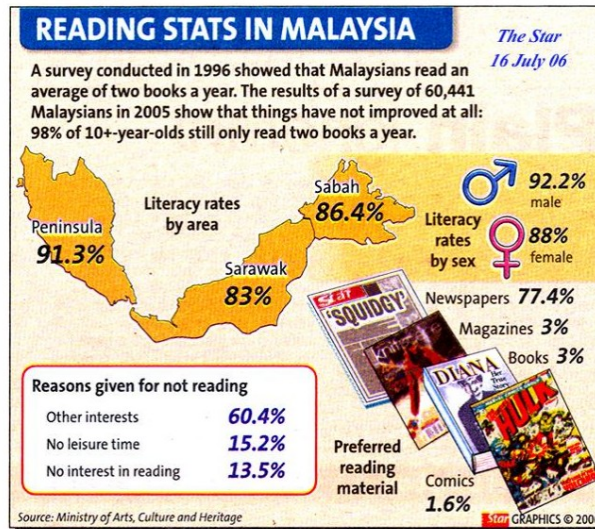
Figure 1: Reading Statistics in Malaysia

(Source: Inderjit, S. (2014). Reading trends and improving reading skills among students in Malaysia. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, *3*(5), 73)

To alleviate this worrying fact, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) came up with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 to emphasize that every child is to achieve 100% basic bilingual (Bahasa Malaysia and the English language) literacy proficiency after 3 years of formal schooling. Therefore, this study aims to explore the learners' reading behaviour in classrooms in hope that it would put in the picture how learners are coping with the current learning development in terms of reading.

2.2 Teachers' role in an ESL reading classroom

In Malaysia, the English Language is perceived as an important tool to gain knowledge. Therefore, teachers play important roles in ensuring learners attain their second language alongside their first language and/or mother tongue. Many, Dewberry, Taylor, and Coady (2009) emphasized on the importance teachers' own language literacy development as these factors highly affects the learners' reading motivation and behaviour. A teacher's enthusiasm and passion in teaching directly influences the learner's reading engagement, and this would positively affect learners' interest in reading. Therefore, teachers would have the best viewpoint of

assessment for their English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' reading behaviour in the classroom, and their perceptions would be the main focal point of this study.

2.3 Reading Behaviour

In Malaysian ESL primary classrooms, reading, alongside writing is one of the most emphasized language skills as allows learners to demonstrate their understanding in language production. Ro and Cheng-ling (2014) summarized four positive behaviour of young ESL readers from Day and Bramford's (1998) reading model: (a) prefer reading native language books, (b) obtained encouraging experiences in ESL reading, (c) have good perception of target language, culture, and the people, and (d) are in a positive ESL reading classroom environment (teacher, classmates, and materials). However, not all reading experiences may be pleasurable for ESL readers as they might face difficulties in decoding long, complex academic reading texts in an unfamiliar language. Therefore, this study is to explore ESL learners' behavioural responses to these situations in the classroom through the lenses of their ESL teachers.

3. METHODOLOGY

Extensive studies published with regards to the ESL reading skill are mostly employed the quantitative method for research, in which most of them presented pre-and post-test results. For this reason, exploratory and investigative information regarding participants' perceptions from such researches are seldom available. To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative approach.

3.1 Research Instrument

As a primary method of collecting data, interviews with three ESL teachers teaching L2 learners in the participating school were adopted. A 20 to 30 minutes semi-structured interview session was employed with each of the ESL teachers. The interview questions were designed to include the teachers' perceptions and recollection of past events with regards to the reading behaviour of their L2 learners in the ESL classrooms.

3.2 Research Participants

Three ESL teachers participated in the interviews. All teachers were graduate students in the education field. The teachers had been teaching the English Language in the participating school for approximately 4 to 7 years.

3.3 Research Procedures & Analysis

The inductive analysis method was used to analyze the verbatim transcription from the audio-recorded interview data. The data is categorized and analyzed through the process of pattern and theme identification.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Five main themes were derived from the emerging patterns in the data analyzed. The themes include skimming and scanning, key word spotting, one-time reading and selective reading, increased non-linear reading, and decreased expansive and comprehensive reading.

4.1 Skimming and Scanning

All three teachers particularly pointed out from the interview that "they [learners] have very limited patience and concentration" when it comes to reading each and every word from long texts. Thus, learners tend to skim and scan for the information they need, usually to "fulfill the instruction comprehension questions" as expressed by a teacher. The teachers claimed that majority of the learners "read for the sake of completing tasks and seldom for enjoyment."

4.2 Key Word Spotting

Following the first reading behaviour, teachers further described that learners make use of the key spotting strategy when they read. A teacher described the situation as such, "since English is their second language, they have less confidence in reading and understanding whole sentences. Instead, they pick out key words they recognize, and try to string together the words to form meaning." Another teacher added that her learners are inclined to pay more attention to pictures and illustrations that comes along with the text for "additional reading support."

4.3 One-Time and Selective Reading

A teacher expressed her frustration over a certain reading behaviour noticed in her learners as she described: "[My] learners have no motivation to reread texts, no matter how interesting the text is. [I] feel that they do not have the luxury to do so, since they do not understand most of what they are reading." Another teacher reported that some of her learners exhibit selective reading behaviour, where her learners "only read what interests them, while at other times only pretend to read along in the classroom."

4.4 Increased Non-Linear Reading

As most learners were described to demonstrate low confidence in their reading, a teacher witnessed that this affected her learners to shift towards the non linear reading behaviour. The teacher explained that "[Learners] find no importance in reading from start to end because most of the texts are beyond their comprehension level." Another teacher confirmed this by stating that most of her learners are "pressed for time to decode and comprehend each and every word from the text they are reading."

4.5 Decreased Expansive and Comprehensive Reading

Due to increased non-linear reading, teachers subsequently witnessed decreased expansive and comprehensive reading from their learners. When learners' concentration and absorption levels are low, they are "discouraged to read further" a teacher noted. Another teacher added that this behaviour in turn made learners "easily distracted and hampered their curiosity to know more through reading."

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be generally depicted that the teachers' of SJKC Chung Hua Semera Sarawak paint a relatively negative perspective on the reading behaviour of their primary ESL learners. Implications that follow might provide suggestions for teachers and stakeholders to cultivate and nurture more positive and improved reading behaviour in ESL learners.

For teachers, it is important that they focus on the correct techniques in executing skill-based and knowledge-based reading competency training for ESL learners' reading development (Lesaux, 2012). According to Al-Issa (2011), teachers need to be skilled in guiding their learners to sound out and recognize words before attaining conceptual and vocabulary knowledge (also known as schemata) to achieve satisfying reading experiences.

Research also shows that earlier exposure to languages narrows the academic gap in bilingual learners (Castro, D. C., Páez, M. M., Dickinson, D. K., & Frede, E., 2011). Similar research also indicates that "acquiring two languages does not cause confusion or language delays in young children... (but) actually facilitates English language learning (Bialystok, 2007). Therefore it is highly encouraged that parents and teachers expose and encourage children to pick up reading from a young age.

Lastly, there should be a systematic assessment practice to identify the sources of reading difficulty, and also supports for teachers to identify and address them. A clear standard should be available for teachers to carry out instructional as well as assessment practices when teaching ESL learners to read.

On the other hand, there are areas that need to be studied further on this issue. One area for doing more research is to conduct such studies in a larger scale that includes the perspective of parents and stake holders. This study could also be improved by employing both qualitative and quantitative approach simultaneously to provide more valid and reliable research results.

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