

## Students' Perception Towards The Usage of the Big Book

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading stories to children would be a challenging and utmost important activity to enhance learning and understanding a language. Various techniques or activities have been proposed in the literature to make reading an enjoyable activity in the classroom. Amongst the many, reading a big book is one of the activities recommended to facilitate students' comprehension of a story delivered by the teacher. This paper focuses on the use of the big book in story reading sessions in two classrooms of primary schools in a rural area in Malaysia. The objectives were to assess students' understanding of the content of or the graphics used in the big book and to examine their comments and opinion on the contents of the big book and its use. One hundred subjects aged seven years old from two literacy classrooms in a rural area school participated in the study. Five other subjects, selected at random, participated in the interview session. Findings of the study revealed that the use of the big book seemed to be of an advantage as it creates fun and meaningful learning of English in the classroom, as well as making reading activity an enjoyable one.*

**Keywords:** big book, reading sessions, meaningful learning

### Introduction

Most primary schools in Malaysia have used the big books for reading. The big book format is a new phenomenon in children's book publication in Malaysia. These big books were published in the Malay and English languages. The use of the big book among children seems to be a good way of exposing them to reading activities and encourage them to read. The big book is introduced during the English lesson in the classroom. Its emphasis is on a whole class teaching and shared reading. Every class in primary schools now spends part of each literacy lesson looking at a book together, but it is difficult for thirty children and a teacher to discuss the contents of the book and for them to share and view one book of an ordinary or small size. Hence the large format book is designed for the whole class to share and participate in the instructional program. This big book could perhaps offer an excellent way to develop literacy, in particular, the learning of new vocabulary and enhancing comprehension of texts, as well as the appreciation of literature in primary schools in Malaysia. The advantage of the big book is it comprises self contained double page spreads display of appealing colorful photographs, fact files, board games and stories of our daily life which capture the distinctive physical and cultural aspects of life in Malaysia

A good quality big book can be the basis of a brilliant lesson which allows all the children to enjoy reading the text, learning varied sentences and new words, in line with the literacy framework stipulated in the syllabus. However, merely enlarging an existing book will not be adequate without good illustrations. Some books have small print, which could be a disadvantage to students sitting at the back of a classroom. This may result in them losing focus of any discussion that is taking place.

Big books are a valuable tool in the teaching of English for children in Malaysia as English is their second and third language. Teachers agree that using big books can improve the development of the four language skills. The introductory part of the lessons, which include the reading and discussion of the big books, followed by activities based on the theme of the book, promote pupils' interest in learning English. Children's confidence in using English can be enhanced. In addition, using the big book creates a relaxing learning environment (Normaliza Abd Rahim *et.al*, 2008).

Positive attitude towards reading can also be fostered among students through the use of the big book. For instance, Morris *et. al* (2003) points out that students age 7-9 years old seem to have a positive attitude towards lessons using the big book. Sitting on the floor and listening to the teacher reading appears to be a highly enjoyable and positive experience. In addition, the children enjoy the language games in groups or pairs that often

follow the reading of the big books. Students usually are on task during pair/group work. They are willing to take risks and work collaboratively on art work. The pairs and groups of students are enthusiastic about reporting their work. Increased motivation, enjoyment and participation were observed during the big book lessons (Holdaway, 1979).

A caution however needs to be noted regarding the selection of the big book. When choosing the big books, teachers should look for a degree of repetitive language structure; themes that would interest and motivate students, with bright, colorful illustrations. Students would show enthusiasm towards the illustrations each time a page is turned by a teacher. Students' facial expressions and their oral expressions are clear indicators of their interest in the illustrations. They encourage creative responses. They inspire many of the less able students to respond in English, thus encouraging responses from all levels of ability.

Students of differing abilities are interested in the big books. They are motivated by the big book and they respond well to questioning and reading with the teacher. They usually respond to the best of their abilities and clearly display a very high degree of interest in the lessons. Children who learn to finger point demonstrate higher levels of concepts of print and phonemic awareness (Morris *et.al.*, 2003). The purpose of shared reading techniques are to help children recognize alphabet letters and associate sounds with letters, develop phonemic awareness skills such as identifying rhyming words or words with the same beginning sound, acquire concepts about print including book orientation, print directionality and concepts about letters and words and learn to finger point read.

The focus of the first reading is the development of emergent reading processes in young learners, and is known as a 'shared reading' or 'big book' approach to develop children's literacy competencies. The approach can be traced back to the work of Don Holdaway in New Zealand (Holdaway, 1979) and comes under the umbrella of 'whole language' approaches to literacy. Holdaway was interested to discover why certain children were already confidently successful in school literacy practices on entry to the first year of school. He found that there were a number of home literacy events and practices which characterized the language experience of successful children. Two of the major findings were that, firstly, many had favorite stories read to them, and with them, repeatedly; and secondly, gradually the child was encouraged to take over more and more of the responsibility for making sense of the text himself.

That adult experts talk around familiar texts with children - rather than read to them - and gradually pass on the responsibility for making meaning to the apprentice, clearly suggests that a form of framework is at work. The adult is scaffolding the reading experience for the child so that the child is expected to, and can, take over the task when he is ready. The move is from caretaker reading, to joint reading to independent reading; and the focus is on making sense of the text through the negotiation of meaning in a non-threatening and 'joyful' manner (Holdaway 1992: 2).

In attempting to provide such insights into classroom reading lessons, the question that is pertinent is how to scaffold the negotiation of meaning with a large group of children. Holdaway's answer was the 'big books'. Holdaway describes the role of the teacher as shifting from a skilled, dramatic demonstrator to that of invisible, validating audience. In the process, 'the skilled and the inept engage in a 'dance' involving the negotiation of meaning, as the expert verbalizes and shares her cognitive and affective processes' (Holdaway 1992: 7). In applying some of the principles of a functional model of language, learning and literacy as social practice (see above), Cullip (1997) found it necessary to adapt this model somewhat by providing for the following:

1. an explicit focus on text purpose and structure (genre);
2. an explicit focus on language form and function;
3. the use of meta-language to talk about the different ways in which different texts work to achieve their purposes;
4. talk about the essential differences between speech and writing, and meaningful, shared contexts to motivate effective meaning negotiations around.

Cullip (1997) also states that the teachers introduce the reading activity for a purpose, either for shared amusement, as part of a project or for recounting a shared experience, such as a trip. The teachers prepare high quality 'Big books' which are relevant to the purpose and which reflect the variety of genres important to schooling and social life; teachers read to the pupils with minimal interruption, tracking words, phrases or lines as they go. Cullip (1997) adds that the teachers repeat the reading - this time while encouraging pupils to join in wherever and whenever they wish. The focus is on the joint construction of meaning, the 'dance' around the text, and the shunting between 'everyday' and 'written language' as appropriate. 'Interruptions' are therefore an integral part of the process. These repeated readings continue within and across sessions (the growing familiarity usually to the delight of the children, if not the teacher!). Also, in later readings, the teacher guides the focus of attention and discussion to four major formal and functional aspects of the text, the purpose, genre and generic structure, the features of print, including letter names, letter-sound correspondence and punctuation, the meanings of the text (comprehension) as coded in the choice of words and structures, and the world beyond the text and the child's experience with these meanings. Subsequently, if small versions of the text are available, children can take the books home to read independently.

As for illustration in the big book, the graphics are created to match the characters, settings, and props of the text (unclear) in the big book. An illustration is a visual such as drawing, painting, photograph or other work of art that stresses subject more than form. The aim of an illustration is to elucidate or decorate a story, poem or piece of textual information (such as a newspaper article), traditionally by providing a visual representation of something described in the text. The editorial cartoon, also known as a political cartoon, is an illustration containing a political or social message. According to Walton (2008), illustrations can be used to display a wide range of subject matter and serve a variety of functions, such as:

1. giving faces to characters in a story
2. displaying a number of examples of an item described in an academic textbook (e.g. A typology)
3. visualizing step-wise sets of instructions in a technical manual
4. communicating subtle thematic tone in a narrative
5. linking brands to the ideas of human expression, individuality and creativity
6. making a reader laugh or smile
7. for fun (to make laugh) funny

## **Objectives**

The objectives of the study were:

- to identify students' perceptions towards the usage of the big books
- to examine their comments and opinion on the contents of the big book.

## **Methodology**

In total, one hundred and five seven year old students from two literacy classrooms in a rural school participated in the study. Whilst one hundred subjects responded to the administered questionnaire, five participated in the interview session. The five subjects provided comments and ideas on the use of the big book. The questionnaire comprises twenty (20) questions on subjects' perception towards the usage of the big book. Ten questions elicit information on the involvement of the teacher, environment and the peers in the use of the big book.. The next ten questions are about the big book and focuses on the role of the teacher. The quantitative data were analyzed in terms of percentage (objective one) and the qualitative data were used to substantiate the findings of the quantitative data (objective two) of the study.

## **Findings**

The findings from the questionnaire are reported below.

### ***Teacher, Environment and Peers***

For questions 1 and 3, all subjects (100%) agreed that they were excited when the teacher used the big book for storytelling. They were also excited when they knew that they would be reading the big book. These were evident when they mentioned that they would be whispering to their friends when they saw the teacher holding the big book. Comments from a number of the students include the following:

*'Look at that big book, I love the story',  
'I love it when the big book is in front of the class',  
'I am so excited today',  
'We are going to listen to the story in the book and I am happy', and  
'I am so happy when I saw the big book there'.*

As for question 2, a majority of the subjects (90%) mentioned that they liked to listen to the teacher's voice while looking at the book. Some of the positive comments made by some of them are: 'I love to listen to my teacher', 'My teacher has good voice', 'I love looking at the big book while listening to the teacher', 'My teacher can make different kind of voices', and 'My teacher is good in storytelling', 'I love to listen to my teacher's storytelling as she has good voice'.

For question 5, when asked about their understanding of the story from the big book, an overwhelming percentage of the subjects (95%) said that they understood the story in the big book. Some subjects pointed out:

*'I understand the story very well',  
'I love the ending part of the story',  
'I want to listen to the story again',  
'I understand the story completely', and  
'I love the story'.*

A similar percentage of subjects (95%) were happy when the teachers started the storytelling by using the big book (Q4). These can be seen in their comments: 'I am so happy now', 'Look, the big book', 'I love the big book', 'I like the big book', and 'I am so happy'. This excitement could be seen in their facial expression. They were seen smiling and whispering to their friends when they saw the teacher holding the big book.

According to graph 2 above (Q6), a majority of the students (90%) stated that they understood the whole story from the big book. They gave reasons like, 'I understood the whole story', 'I can even tell my friends about the story', and 'My sister at home knew about this story because I told her the story'. Similarly, 90% of the subjects confirmed that they were really excited when they saw the teacher taking the big book to start the lesson (Q7). They said, 'When I saw they teacher holding the big book, I was really excited', 'I would smile when I saw the teacher with the big book' and 'I love this lesson when the teacher is using the big book'.

For question 8, 80% of the subjects confirmed that they could retell the story after listening to the story from the big book. This is evident in their actions. The subjects volunteered to retell the story when asked by the teacher. A small percentage (20%) of the subjects disagreed that they could not retell the story due to shyness and lack of confidence. The subjects mentioned that 'I don't want to retell the story', 'I am very shy', 'I know the story but I don't want to retell the story' and 'No, I don't want to retell the story'. For question 9, a large percentage (70%) of the subjects agreed that they liked to sit on the floor when listening to the story from the big book. They were seen rushing to sit right in front. Their comments in the interview concur with this finding. These can be seen below:

*'I would run to sit in front when I saw the teacher with the big book',  
'I love to sit on the floor to listen to the story from the big book', and  
'I can really see the big book clearly if I sit on the floor'.*

When asked what they would do if they did not understand the story related by the teacher from the big book (Q10), more than half the subjects (60%) of the subjects agreed that they would ask their friends if they did not understand the story. When the subjects were asked the reason why some of them kept quiet during the lesson, they said that they would only like to confirm the story and gave their views to the peers. Some of the comments made are: 'I would ask my friends if I don't understand the story', 'I like to explain to my friends if they don't understand the story', 'I actually understand the story and I want to help my friends by telling them the story again,' and 'I love talking about the story again'. The remaining 40% of the subjects disagreed by saying that they would not ask their friends if they did not understand the story. This was because they probably did not like to interrupt the flow of the story. This was mentioned by a few subjects who said that 'I would rather listen to the teacher', and 'I would prefer to concentrate well'.

According to Graph 3 above, a majority of the subjects (90%) of the subjects agreed that they liked to see beautiful illustrations in the big book (Q11). They commented as follows: 'Look at that beautiful pictures', 'Look that is really beautiful', 'Really fantastic pictures', and 'I like that!'.

For questions 12 and 13, all the subjects (100%) agreed that they liked the color in the big book and they liked to see the cartoon illustrations in the big book. Their comments include the following: 'Wow, I like the colors', 'Good pictures', 'Look at that one', 'I love the colors on that page' and 'Wow, beautiful'. Also, they mentioned that 'That cartoon looks real', 'I like the eyes of that rabbit', 'I wish I can draw like that', and 'That girl looks so pretty'. All the conversations were followed by their smile when they looked at the illustrations. They were seen happy and contented while looking at the illustrations.

For question 14, all subjects also agreed that they liked to see the illustration while listening to the story from the big book story related by the teacher. The subjects agreed and happy when they said 'I loved it when we have storytelling because I can see the pictures', 'I would prefer to look at the illustration when the teacher is telling us stories' and 'I like the illustration there'. In relation to this, 90% of the subjects said that they would look at the illustrations while reading the words in the pages while the teacher was telling the story from the big book. The subjects mentioned, 'I will read on my own and look at the pictures', 'When the teacher is telling us stories from the big book, I read and look at the pictures at the same time', 'I love looking at the pictures in the big book' and 'I can read very well when the teacher shows me the big book'.

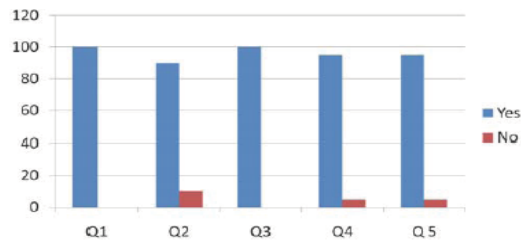
Graph 4 presents the results of students' responses to five questions pertaining to the big book and their reactions towards the illustration in the big book. For Q16, more than half of the subjects (60%) of the subjects agreed that they would use their fingers to point at the characters that they liked in the big book. The subjects also mentioned 'I love to point at the best characters', 'I would prefer to point at the animals there', and 'That is not the character that I like'. The subjects felt that they would understand the story more if they use their fingers to point at the pictures. For question 17, a similar percentage of the subjects (60%) agreed that they would tell their friends sitting next to them about the illustrations when the teacher was using the big book for storytelling. They pointed out: 'I would tell my friends', 'I would share with my friends', and 'I would tell my friends if they don't understand'. The remaining 40% of the subjects disagreed to tell their friends. This might be due to the fact that they would prefer to concentrate more on the listening to the teacher's voice when reading from the big book. For question 18, a majority of the subjects (80%) agreed that they were really excited when they saw the illustration in the big book. They said: 'I am so excited to see the pictures', 'I love the pictures in the big book', and 'I love this part'. The remaining small percentage (20%) of the subjects disagreed with the statement.

For questions 19 and 20, while 70% of the subjects agreed that they understood the story more by looking at the characters in the big book and they read the big book alone after the storytelling session. 30% of the subjects

disagreed with the statement. They pointed out : ‘I understand the story more by looking at the characters’, ‘I love the story when I see the characters’ and ‘The characters are beautiful and I understand the story better’. They also mentioned that they would prefer to read the book alone after storytelling because they would be able to appreciate the illustrations more. They said ‘I want to read the book on my own now’, ‘I love to see the pictures from the big book on my own’, and ‘I love when I look at the pictures on my own’.

## Summary of the Findings

Based on the above discussion, the major findings of the study can be summarized as follows:



**Graph 1:**

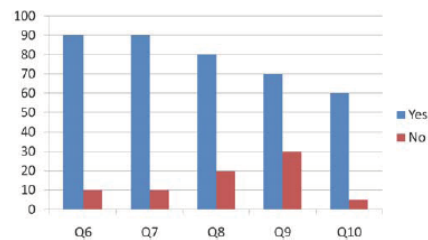
Q1: I like when the teacher is using the big book for storytelling

Q2: I am excited to see the big book in front of me

Q3: I am happy to see the big book in front of me

Q4: I love it when the teacher starts the storytelling by using the big book

Q5: I understand the story when the teacher is using the big book for storytelling



**Graph 2:**

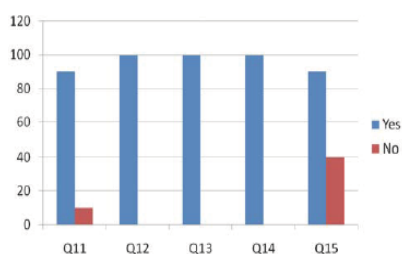
Q6: I understand the whole story when the teacher is using the big book for storytelling.

Q7: I am excited when the teacher is using the big book for the storytelling session

Q8: I can storytell the story after the teacher storytold the story from the big book

Q9: I like to sit on the floor while listening to the teacher using the big book for storytelling

Q10: I will ask my friend if I don't understand the story that the teacher storytold from the big book



**Graph 3:**

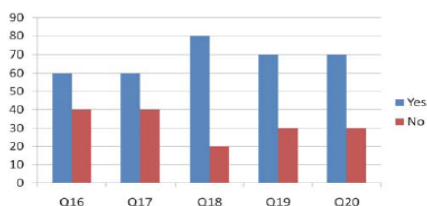
Q11: I like to see beautiful illustration in the big book

Q12: I like the colour in the big book

Q13: I like to see the cartoon illustration in the big book

Q14: I like to see the illustration while listening to the story from the big book storytold by the teacher

Q15: I will see the illustration while reading the words in the pages where the teacher is storytelling



**Graph 4:**

Q16: I will use my finger to finger point the character that I like in the big book

Q17: I will tell my friend next to me about the illustration when the teacher is using the big book for storytelling.

Q18: I am excited when I saw the illustration in the big book

Q19: I understand the story more by looking at the characters in the big book

Q20: I will read the big book alone after the storytelling session

1. The big book seemed to be the favorite amongst all the subjects.
2. More than 80% of the subjects understood the content of the story in the big book.
3. More than 60% of the subjects loved to sit down of the floor to listen to the story being told by the teacher.
4. More than 80% of the subjects were able to retell the story from the big book.
5. More than 60% of the subjects loved to listen to the teacher for storytelling.
6. 100% of the subjects loved the illustrations in the big book.
7. More than 80% of the subjects loved the illustration of the characters from the big book.
8. More than 90% of the subjects loved the colors of the illustration from the big book.
9. More than 80% of the subjects preferred to look at the illustration and finger point at the words.
10. 100% of the subjects were happy when the teacher used the big book for the lesson.
11. A small number of subjects (20%) felt that talking to friends while listening to the storytelling would not be agreeable.

12. A small number of subjects (20%) felt that discussing the content of the story from the big book with their friends would not be agreeable.

## **Conclusion**

This study albeit small-scale, has provided some positive findings regarding the use of the big book in the classroom to enhance literacy in English in the rural classrooms. The use of the big book as a means to encourage reading among primary school students and to facilitate and enhance reading lessons in the classroom seems promising. Moreover, the use of the big book can create conducive learning context as students have the opportunity to interact more with their teacher and peers. Although it is normal for children in other countries to have the big book in their literacy classroom, for Malaysian students, reading the big book is something rewarding and worthwhile. To date, Malaysian schools have not used the big book in the literacy class, but mainly for independent reading in some schools. The preference in schools is to use the text book provided and prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Thus, it is highly recommended that teachers use the big book to attract students to participate in the reading activities and to foster an enjoyable reading lesson in the classroom. If used creatively and keeping their students' ability in mind, teachers can adopt the use of the big book according to their students' ability and proficiency, which would help their students to learn new vocabulary and to enhance comprehension of a text. Despite its potential in the classroom, teachers are advised to select books which have good colors and appropriate illustration (Walton, 2008). The age of the subjects and the gender should be taken into consideration when selecting books as good illustrations are important to attract students' attention to the big book (Walton, 2008). It is hoped that future studies would focus on reading activities using the big book and the types of illustrations that are suitable for young students in Malaysia.

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