

Towards an Effective Extensive Reading Programme for Malaysian Schools

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Abstract

Becoming proficient in a second or foreign language requires a great deal of appropriate target language input. However, for many learners of English in Malaysian secondary schools, exposure to the language is unfortunately confined to just the school environment, and this makes teaching English become an even greater challenge for teachers. Given the

limited time during lessons for language input, the solution appears to lie beyond the confines of the English language lesson. One way of providing greater language input is through extensive reading programmes which provide language learners with much needed language input. This paper focuses on the viability of a stand-alone extensive reading programme for supporting learners of English. The discussion is anchored to conversations with Malaysian English language teachers who share their thoughts and experiences related to the long-running NILAM and NILAM 2.0 reading programmes. Findings are presented under three main themes which emerged from interviews with English language teachers, namely the themes of understanding and appreciation, teacher resistance and external support. The teachers appeared to view the NILAM reading programmes as an additional task that they were forced to manage with little external support. Although the creation of awards was well-intended, it took away from the aim of encouraging students to read for the sake of enjoyment. Despite apparent pessimism about the NILAM programmes, teachers were unanimous in their belief that a good extensive reading programme can indeed support learners with building their vocabulary range and enhancing their general proficiency in English.

Keywords: Extensive reading, English language proficiency, Teacher resistance

Introduction

In simple terms, Extensive Reading (henceforth ER) is about reading as many easy books as possible for pleasure. The importance of ER is well reflected in the amount of research interest that this area continues to draw (Boakye, 2017; Boutorwick, Macalister, & Elgort, 2019; McLean & Rouault, 2017). Earlier studies, such as those by Day and Bamford (2002), Prowse (2002) and Maley (2008), have collectively identified key characteristics of a successful ER programme within a broader framework for language learning. Among these characteristics are the need for a large selection of reading material, the opportunity for students to choose material based on personal interest, an environment that promotes reading for pleasure and information, reading opportunities both in and out of class, and materials with language pitched at a level appropriate for the students. Following these studies, Donaghy (2016) proposes seven important principles for successful ER:

- Students should read a lot, and read quite fast - at least 150 to 200 words per minute.
- The reading material should be quite easy for the students' level. Too many unfamiliar words or vocabulary hinders students from reading quickly and fluently.
- Students should independently choose the books to read rather than have the books selected by their teachers.
- There should be access to sufficient books from a variety of genres and topics to choose from.

- Students read for reasons such as pleasure, seeking information or for general understanding.
- Reading is individual and silent.
- The teacher acts as a role model, which means the teacher reads with the students, guiding them if necessary and monitoring their progress in reading.

ER programmes are important as they support the learning of any target language. Studies have revealed that ER programmes can result in improved reading (Bell, 2001; Endris, 2018; Fujimori, 2006; Fujita & Noro, 2009) and writing competence (Nakanishi, 2005), better oral and aural skills (Nakamura, 2018), greater vocabulary growth (Horst, 2005; Lin, Pandian, & Jaganathan, 2018; Yamamoto, 2011), and increased motivation, self-esteem and empathy (Lake, 2014; Tanaka, 2017). Students who read extensively also become more autonomous learners of a second or foreign language (Lin, Pandian, & Jaganathan, 2018).

However, the right conditions are needed to ensure that an ER programme results in benefits to the language learner. Awareness about the benefits of ER programmes is strongly reflected in the Malaysian education system. Over the years, a variety of reading programmes have featured prominently in Malaysian schools. Subramaniam (2003) tracked the development of reading programmes in Malaysian primary schools and presented the various forms reading programmes took in Malaysian schools. The earliest extensive reading programme was the “New Zealand Readers Programme” which was introduced in the 1970s.

The programme which focused on learners in Primary 4, 5 and 6 was introduced to ensure parity in the development of English Language proficiency and competence between students in urban and rural schools. Then in the 1980s, the New Zealand Readers programme was replaced with the “World Bank Project” which included some Malaysian folk stories such as *The Legend of Hang Tuah* and *Mahsuri*. In the late 1990s, a reading programme for both primary and secondary schools was introduced.

In a Ministry of Education publication titled *Program NILAM: Konsep dan Panduan Pelaksanaan di Sekolah* (Jawatankuasa Induk Gerakan Tabiat Membaca, 1998), the implementation of the NILAM programme was reported to be overseen by the National Reading Encouragement and Habit Committee at the Ministry of Education, Malaysia and was geared at encouraging reading habits among students in schools. NILAM is the acronym for “Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca” or “Reading as the Pulse of Knowledge”. The programme was officially implemented in 1999 for students from Year 1 right up to Form 5 via a Professional Circular Letter dated 22 May 1998. The main aim of the NILAM programme was to inculcate the reading habit among students and evidence of this was to be captured through recordings of the number of books which were read by students from Year 1 to Form 5 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008). After 2 decades, the NILAM programme continues to run in schools albeit slightly reconceptualised and repackaged as NILAM 2.0 in 2019.

The running of the original NILAM programme involved 3 stages:

- Stage 1: Reading and recording of books read – students were to read books of their own choice, record the details of author, title, pagination, publisher, synopsis or mind map of the books read.
- Stage 2: Endorsing record and data collection – teachers were to endorse and send the record to the Resource Centre Coordinator or the NILAM Programme Coordinator in their respective schools for further analysis before the data was submitted to the Resource Centre in the respective state education departments who would then submit the data to the Division of Educational Technology at the MOE.
- Stage 3: Giving recognition and awards to the schools as well as the students who read the most books as recorded in the NILAM Programme record book - the recognition and awards were in the form of certificates, book prizes or some indication in the yearly progress report or school-leaving certificate of students.

These 3 stages fell into two levels of the NILAM programme namely “*Jauhari*” (level 1) and “*Rakan Membaca*” (level 2). Level 1 was to build the reading skills of students and to inculcate interest in reading. Level 2 focused on the ability of students to promote reading among their peers and participate in reading enhancement activities such as storytelling, and participation in reading circles.

Table 1

Awards under “Jauhari” (Level 1)

School Level	Number of Books Read	Award
Primary	90 – 179	Bronze
	180 – 269	Silver
	270 – 359	Gold
Secondary	360 and above	NILAM
	72 – 143	Bronze
	144 – 215	Silver
	216 – 287	Gold
	288 and above	NILAM

Note. Source: Ministry of Education Malaysia (2008)

As table 1 reveals, awards were also created to serve as extrinsic motivation at level 1 while level 2 emphasized leadership in reading activities. Students who read over 100 books in a year would be qualified for level 2 which accentuated the students’ ability to guide and inspire other students to read. Marks for students in level 2 were calculated based on the number of activities they participated in:

Table 2

Cumulative Marks for Level 2

Activities	Marks per Activity	Cumulative Marks	Award
Storytelling	5 marks	100 – 199	Bronze
Book Talk	5 marks	200 – 299	Silver
Book Review	5 marks	300 – 399	Gold
Book Lending	1 mark/ borrower	400 and above	NILAM

Note. Source: Ministry of Education Malaysia (2008)

In 2003, the “Champions of NILAM” award was created to motivate students and schools to perform. Awards were given to exemplary students from four different categories namely, urban primary, urban secondary, rural primary and rural secondary. Although the management of the programme is independent of subjects taught in school, it has often been linked to the teaching of languages, particularly English. The hope is that the programme may serve to nurture a love for the language and help students enhance their proficiency in English by reading more. The NILAM programme therefore is often managed by English language teachers.

The assumption would be that a long-running national reading programme would translate into higher literacy rates in the country over time. However, Malaysia’s performance in international literacy assessments revealed quite the opposite. Despite running the NILAM

programme over so many years, Malaysian students were placed at a dismal 55 from 74 participating countries in literacy as reported in the 2009 PISA Report, (Puteh, Mohd Zin, & Ismail, 2016). In 2012, Malaysia dropped even further to 59 out of 65 participating countries.

Although the NILAM programme has been running in schools for approximately two decades, there appears to be relatively little independent research which justifies the need for the NILAM programme to continue in Malaysian schools. The only study which was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of the programme was one by Wan Ali, Hashim, Sheikh Ahmad, Mohd. Meerah, Mustapha, Mokhtar, and Hashim (2005) who carried out a survey among teachers and students. Their findings revealed that students were generally positive about the programme while teachers reported of challenges in managing the programme. Opinions appeared to differ along the urban-rural divide. Since then, other studies have only looked at the NILAM programme in the periphery of other central issues such as library management (Mansor & Mailok, 2013), the re-introduction of literature in schools (Mansor, Rasul, Abd Rauf & Koh, 2013), and reading performance (Puteh, Mohd Zin, & Ismail, 2016).

More recently, two doctoral studies have drawn greater attention to the implementation of the NILAM programme at schools. Md. Akhir (2018) examined the role of school leadership as a success criterion for the NILAM programme. She determined that both internal and external factors shaped the nature of leadership provided for the implementation

of the NILAM programme at schools. In another study, Kaur (2015) argued that limited facilitative conditions have not allowed for the NILAM programme to realise its potential as a proper ER programme, particularly one that supports Malaysian students to become proficient in English. In building her case for testing the effectiveness of an ER programme she conceives, Kaur (2015) speculates on limitations of the NILAM programme. She suggests numerous factors such as lack of teacher supervision, monitoring practices that affect enjoyment, and the lack of suitable books as factors that limit their potential of the NILAM programme as an ER programme.

In this paper, the focus was on the aforementioned limited facilitative conditions and how English language teachers at secondary schools managed the NILAM programme and tapped into the potential of the programme to enhance the teaching of English. The specific research questions this paper addresses are:

- i. How do English language teachers view their role in the successful implementation of the extensive reading programme?
- ii. What are the barriers to teachers playing an effective role in the successful implementation of the extensive reading programme?

Method

The present study was undertaken to locate and understand the implementation of the

NILAM and NILAM 2.0 programmes in Malaysian schools in relation to English language education. To understand the implementation of the programmes, English language teachers who are at the heart of the implementation process were interviewed. Indeed, without the buy-in and support of these teachers, it would be impossible for any ER programme to begin seeing positive results.

Narrative inquiry served as the research design. It is a design which is widely drawn on to capture details of experiences through narrative threads (Tsui, 2007). Narrative inquiry serves as the ideal design for the present study because it empowers research participants to lead in determining the themes which emerge from conversations about their personal experiences (O'Toole, 2018). Furthermore, the retelling and interpretations of past experiences by respondents is a construction of their reality (Stoughton, 2007), and this serves as accurate insights into the management practices of classroom practitioners.

Given the fact that all primary and secondary schools carry out the NILAM programme, the sample could have been drawn from just about any school. Based on convenience sampling, English language teachers from within the immediate community of practitioners who were known to the researchers were invited from two states in Malaysia. The only condition set prior to the selection of the sample was that the teachers had to possess at least 10 years of teaching experience and be involved in the NILAM programme.

Twelve English language teachers at five secondary schools in the states of Selangor and

Perak were interviewed for this study. All have been involved in the NILAM programmes in various capacities. The background information of the teachers is presented in the table below:

Table 3

Demographic Background of English Teachers Interviewed

Teacher	Gender	Teaching Experience (no. of years)	Involvement in NILAM (no. of years)
T1	Female	34	7
T2	Female	31	14
T3	Female	19	5
T4	Female	12	12
T5	Female	30	20
T6	Female	28	15
T7	Female	13	5
T8	Female	28	18
T9	Female	30	15
T10	Female	28	20
T11	Female	29	2
T12	Female	29	4
Average		25.3	13.1

The teachers were asked a set of questions to illicit their personal views and professional practice in relation to both the NILAM programmes. The interview questions were developed

based on a review of literature and feedback from two academics with a background in extensive reading. An initial set of 8 questions was then reduced to six after a pilot test involving 3 teachers who did not make up the final list of teachers who were interviewed.

The piloting of the interview questions helped the researchers paraphrase questions for clarity and avoid redundancy. In addition to questions designed to ascertain the experience of the teachers with the NILAM programme, the final set of questions were also geared at eliciting the participants' views on (a) the aims of the NILAM programme, (b) the difference between the NILAM and NILAM 2.0 programmes, (c) the potential of the programmes in helping students improve their proficiency in English. To ensure the validity of the interview process, the interviewers drew on the same set of questions although the interviews were carried out at different times by different members of the research team. Given the iterative nature of data collection through interviews, each of the four researchers coded the interviews separately before convening to establish intercoder reliability and settling on the final set of themes. The researchers drew on the grounded theory approach for this.

The following section presents their views and practices and serves as documented evidence on how the NILAM programme is received and implemented by ELT practitioners at schools.

Findings and Discussion

The NILAM and NILAM 2.0 programmes fulfil to some extent the conditions of an ER programme. However, there are some evident points of departure. It appears that in the case of the NILAM 2.0 at least, the programme moves beyond a focus on pure reading to also include student participation in other language enhancement activities. For example, the NILAM 2.0 also encompasses participation in spelling bee competitions, action songs, and choral speaking. In addition, guidelines for the implementation of both the NILAM and NILAM 2.0 do not emphasise the role of teachers as role-models in the “while-reading” stage of the programme. Day and Bamford (2002), Prowse (2002), Maley (2008), and Donaghy (2016) all stress the importance of teachers serving as role models in extensive reading activities.

Understanding and Appreciation

The teachers who were interviewed were English language teachers with an average of 25.3 years teaching experience. The teachers also had direct involvement in NILAM programmes for an average of 13.1 years. All teachers were involved with the NILAM programme at their respective schools at the time of the interviews. Generally, all the teachers who were interviewed had a clear understanding of the aims of the NILAM programme. As reflected in the excerpts below, they recognised the NILAM programme as a programme designed to inculcate the reading habit among school students:

*To encourage students to pick up reading as **a habit**... (T1)*

*To encourage reading among students and teachers... and to get pupils to encourage **the reading habit** among family members (T2)*

*To encourage students to read and make reading as **a habit** (T3)*

*To instil **the love towards reading** ... (T4)*

*To instil **the habit of reading** among students. (T5)*

*To promote students **to read books**... (T6)*

*To inculcate **reading habits** among pupils to increase their vocabulary, improve language skills and increase their knowledge. (T9)*

*Aimed at **encouraging students and also rewarding students for reading** any materials to enhance their knowledge and to improve their proficiency in the language. (T10)*

*To **encourage students at school to read** and practice as a continuous habit of self-evaluation. (T11)*

*It's a **reading programme which involves documentation** by students and also teachers. (T12)*

These descriptions of the programme reflect an understanding and appreciation at the operational level, that is, the teachers knew what the end goal of the programme was, and this was a positive sign as knowledge of the aims was necessary to help ensure that students were supported in the reading journey. All the teachers viewed the NILAM programme as an

extensive reading programme which required students to read independently. However, while all teachers confirmed that they were involved in the implementation of the programme at their schools, only 6 of the 12 teachers were aware of the introduction of the improved NILAM 2.0 programme. This suggested that the dissemination of information about the improved programme was poor. In relation to this, teachers remarked:

It is so difficult to keep up with so many programmes which are implemented in school.

Now we have to deal with the CEFR. It is endless. (T3)

I think the NILAM 2.0 is the same as the earlier programme, but our department head

has not given any instructions on changes so we are continuing with the existing

programme. (T6)

When it comes to NILAM 2.0 it is not really a program that suits my students at school

as their background is not from a situation where they can access e-books easily

whenever they want. (T11).

T3's remark about the CEFR is related to the introduction of the new curriculum in Malaysian primary and secondary schools. The English language syllabi have been aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and teachers are adjusting to changes in the delivery of the subject in their classrooms. This suggests that teachers are probably at the receiving end of one too many instructions about the implementation of programmes, and are feeling overwhelmed. This is a cause for concern because without the

buy-in of teachers, programmes are likely to fail at the implementation stage (Lee & Min, 2017). T3's comment actually suggests that there is a failure in recognising the importance of an ER programme for the CEFR-aligned curriculum. If the connections are not made for teachers to see the link between their existing classroom practices with an ER programme, then there is a possibility that teachers may not be as committed in supporting the programme.

The fact that some teachers are not aware of the NILAM 2.0 programme suggests serious gaps in its implementation. Teachers must be consulted and they should feel that they are collaborators in any initiative that runs at schools (Kennedy, Smith, Hansen, Lindhout, Morgan & Lubans, 2018). Information overload is also a likely contributing factor to this situation as teachers feel overwhelmed with the amount of information they need to digest about on-going and new programmes. Chen-Levi (2020) cautions that this problem is exacerbated in schools perceived as bureaucratic hierarchical organizations where information needs to pass through multiple layers of authority.

Teacher Resistance

Teachers who were aware about NILAM 2.0 described it in relation to the old NILAM programme:

The range of materials accepted is wider. (T4)

All subject teachers are involved and all types of genre are encouraged to be read e.g.

journals, articles and flyers. (T5)

Expanded types of materials for reading to include non-printed materials such as e-book, e-journal etc. ... materials not only limited to books, but also include charts, comics, brochures, newspapers, etc. (T7)

*They [Students] have to **read a variety of material from a variety of sources***

*It goes **beyond printed books**; digital books and online materials. (T9)*

*... [NILAM2.0] **broadens the scope** and (is) more interesting. (T10)*

*NILAM 2.0 is **an upgraded version** of the earlier NILAM program where digital contents such as e-books and journals can be accessed for students reading. (T12)*

The teachers were also asked to share their opinion about the effectiveness of the NILAM programme. On a positive note, some teachers reported the following about the NILAM programme:

*Reading [through the NILAM programme] has **helped pupils to increase their vocabulary, knowledge and creativity.** (T2)*

*It will be **effective if it is conducted fully** among all students and teachers, and better to instil if reading is a culture. (T5)*

*It will be highly **effective if the students read a variety** of printed materials in English. (T6)*

*Reading **increases word power or vocabulary.** Reading increases ideas/creativity which*

they can apply in writing essays. (T7)

*Students will be **exposed to more vocabulary and good sentence constructions.** (T9)*

*Students now spend most of their time online or on their gadgets. They might be **more inclined towards online reading**, compared to printed materials. (T1)*

*Yes, because when they read material in English, it **directly improves their proficiency in English** because they are exposed to a wide range of vocabulary and also sophisticated sentence structures. (T8)*

*I believe that the programme is run effectively because **I can see many students now showing interest to read and lend books** compared to before and they are also taking their time to complete their NILAM report books as we teachers always motivate them to do so. (T11)*

However, the teachers also offered comments which suggested that they questioned the effectiveness of the programme:

*I don't think it is a very effective reading programme in school because teachers **do not have enough time to carry out this programme effectively.** (T1)*

*Unfortunately, **teachers are bogged down with too much work** to keep track of their reading. (T2)*

*We can only advise them on the **benefits** of reading which I do regularly.*

***Students are too busy** with their academic achievements. (T5)*

*(The students) **feel lazy to write and keep records** because they know it does not carry any marks and they are more focused on other academic activities. (T12)*

Despite questioning its effectiveness, the teachers believed in the importance of an ER programme as reflected in the following comments:

*Yes, especially for those who have reading problems while for others, this programme **can also improve their language proficiency**(T2)*

*I agree because through reading, they **will increase their vocabulary**, so they will be able to speak better English. (T4)*

*... the students are **exposed to other authentic materials** covering wide topics*

*Reading helps to **develop proficiency** because only then they get to know more vocabulary and write and speak the language correctly. (T7)*

*Yes, at least they are **assured of a reading session** in school as they might not have the interest, resources or influence to do reading at home. (T9)*

*Yes, because **they need more exposure to the reading environment** in order to perform better. (T10)*

*Yes, that is **the only way to improve language proficiency**. (T3)*

*It is actually **a good start for creating a lifelong reading habit** among them... so the NILAM (programme) at the school level really gives all the students the opportunity to develop a reading habit. (T11)*

It appears therefore that while they believed in the value of an ER programme, they regarded the implementation of the NILAM programme as an additional burden on teachers. The narratives point to teacher resistance which is well-documented in studies examining the implementation of innovations at schools. Terhart (2013) contends that teacher resistance is borne out of a mismatch between the desire for change by reformers and the teachers who are tasked with implanting the changes. Despite acknowledging the potential strength of the programme, particularly in supporting the learning of English, the teachers were quick to point out that the programme was a burden to them. Teacher resistance must be addressed for new programmes to take off. This is because, regardless of how well-intended the implementation of programmes may be, they are destined to fail if they are implemented without considering the needs of teachers (Choi, 2017; Smith, 2020). On this point, Terhart (2013) concludes that addressing teacher resistance is a great challenge, and programmes have been run over many years with knowledge that they are failing simply because investments have been high and teacher resistance has not been successfully addressed.

External Support

The teachers were also asked to provide suggestions on ways to improve the implementation of the NILAM and NILAM 2.0 programme. Their responses centred on the theme of external support, namely support from school administrators, parent-teacher associations and support from home:

*Schools need to **arrange a specific time** for every teacher to do NILAM and reward reading achievement. (T3)*

***Get the School Resource Centre to invest in more reading material** especially local newspapers and magazines like Reader's Digest and National Geographic. (T6)*

*The NILAM should be **included in the class time-table**. (T7)*

***Get parents to be more involved in reading programmes** through PIBG (Parent-Teacher Association). (T8)*

***Cooperation from all** is needed, the school, students, parents and others. (T9)*

*If there is **commitment from the students themselves**, then the programme can benefit them. (T4)*

***Support from everywhere, starting from home**, school, surroundings, peers and parents, who should all be involved extensively in order to instil the reading habit. (T10)*

*The government should **ensure good library facilities at all schools**... More competitions need to be organized for the students so that the reading habit is encouraged even more. (T11)*

The narratives suggest that teachers feel isolated in ensuring that the NILAM programme effectively supports learners to improve their proficiency in English. They feel that the implementation of the programme and the apparent need to monitor progress is on them. The contributing factor to this is the way the NILAM programme has been conceived. With

awards and recognition tied to the programme, comes the need to monitor and assess performance in terms of the number of books each student has read. The burden of this task is passed to teachers who undoubtedly see this as yet another task that they have been forced to take on. They automatically begin to question why they have to bear the additional burden without external support. Literature on ER programmes suggests that students benefit from the support of not just teachers, but also other significant adults who have the potential to shape the culture of reading and this includes parents (Boakye, 2017; Zevenbergen, Worth, Dretto, & Travers, 2018). Despite this, it appears that the success of the NILAM programme is largely dependent on teachers.

Conclusion

The teacher narratives captured in this study suggests that the NILAM and NILAM 2.0 programmes to some extent resemble an extensive reading programme. Fundamentally, they promote the reading culture. English language teachers who are tasked with implementing and monitoring the programmes agree that an ER programme is important in helping their students with proficiency. However, the NILAM programme appears to be failing in its implementation. Teachers are feeling isolated in managing the programme and this is significantly contributing to teacher resistance towards the programme. Without the buy-in of teachers, any programme introduced in schools is destined for failure. The isolation felt by

teachers and their resistance to the programme is also because they have not been able to play a contributing role in the evolution of the programme over the last two decades. Rather, they are recipients of instructions.

Rather than proposing yet another programme at schools, the NILAM 2.0 programme should move away from an over-emphasis on assessing and recording student performance in the reading programme. Instead, the programme needs to ensure that reading is an enjoyable activity. Reconceptualising the NILAM 2.0 must involve active engagement with teachers, especially in discussing the implementation of the programme.

This study was limited by several factors. As its aim was to explore teacher narratives about reading programmes at schools, only 10 teachers were involved in the data collection process. A future, large-scale project is warranted where teachers are invited to participate in a survey on their experiences with the NILAM and NILAM 2.0 programmes. Future studies may also want to explore teacher resistance to the implementation of ER programmes. This is particularly important if a refined NILAM 2.0 programme is to succeed as an ER programme which supports English language learning. Conditions for external support, particularly from parents and school administrators, is also an area of study which needs to be undertaken to understand how the right ecosystem needs to be created to support ER programmes. In recognising the limited time that teachers may have to dedicate towards ER programmes, novel approaches to ER such as the promotion of peer reading circles need to be explored.

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