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Prose Reading: The Influence of Text-Reader Factors

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Abstract

This study highlights the importance of text-reader factors in prose reading. The study was carried out to identify the text-reader factors involved in enhancing reading comprehension. A qualitative research methodology was employed involving individual in-depth interview sessions with six average ability Form Two students from a secondary school. The interviews were conducted to gauge their views on the influence of text-reader factors in text comprehension. The interview questions centered on the literature textbook currently used in school and also the short story "Cheat" by Allan Baillie included in the book. Thematic analysis was carried out on the data collected. The findings show that text-reader factors affect text comprehension. The factors include pictures, font, the author, glossary, text organization, cover of the book and the length of the literary prose forms. The reader factors are related to the students' life background, interest, and motivation in reading. The study implies that these text-reader factors must be met to ensure improved reading comprehension ability among students.

Keywords: Reading, text-reader factors, text comprehension.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is an interactive process (Smith, 1982). As such, text-reader factors must be examined to ensure successful text comprehension. Both the factors should be compatible; meaning that the text must be comprehensible to the reader thus reading becomes a pleasure. Many scholars have pointed out that a match between the text-reader factors is essential for the reader to make sense of the written language that eventually ends in a focused reading process. Janan (2011) found out that successful reading depends on factors such as reader characteristics, text features, and instructional strategies. Gaskins (1993) identified that comprehension entails three components, the reader, text, and the activity. Additionally, Woolley (2011) said that comprehension depends on a variety of reader-related, text-related, and situational factors. The proposed idea from these researchers is that apart from other factors, text-reader factors play a significant role in developing literacy skills.

The integration of the Literature Component in the English language syllabus is one of the intervention programs implemented in Malaysian secondary schools to improve, if not enhance, English language proficiency among the students especially in reading. Therefore the study examined the prose forms in the Literature Component prescribed for lower secondary students in Malaysia. This is to gauge whether the prose forms selected match the students' needs to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention programs conducted.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Young Adult Literature

The term Young Adult Literature (YAL) emerged in the late 1960s. It refers to realistic fiction that addresses problems, issues, and life circumstances which are of interest to young readers aged approximately between 12 to 18 (Bucher & Hinton, 2014). The books usually have a young protagonist and present young people dealing with issues such as the sense of belonging, falling in love, deciding what to do in the future, violence, drug dependency, alcoholism, loneliness, death of a loved one, pregnancy or divorce of parents. By giving teenagers such a frame of reference, it helps them to find role models, to make sense of the world they inhabit, to develop a personal philosophy of being, to determine what is right and wrong and to cultivate a personal sensibility (Cart, 2008). Moreover, they offer hope to the young reader that things can change, improve and they can achieve success. Besides, the issues discussed in the prose help students deal with the consequences of their own decisions.

According to Stover (2001), YAL influences students in three ways which are engagement, development, and diversity. The issues in YAL capture their interest as it deals with teen-related issues and this motivates them to be engaged in the reading process. In the long term, YAL helps develop students' literacy skills, especially in reading and writing. With a wide range of topics, YAL provides a rich platform through which students could live through many experiences, thus allowing them to experience diversity through their reading. Judging from the physical aspects of the texts, most of the YAL is of manageable length for students and contain simple

language that neither threatens nor bore them. The plot and characters are easy to understand (Nagayar et al., 2015).

In Malaysia, YAL is incorporated in the English language teaching and learning curriculum. Poems, short stories, novels, and drama are prescribed for secondary school students. Compared to other literary genres, YAL stands a more favorable position when choices of suitable reading material for adolescents have to be made (Kassim, 2011). This is due to the fictitious depiction of adolescent experiences that have a strong impact on teenage readers at this stage of their lives. Additionally, by identifying the characters in the novels that they can relate to, young people may acquire a sympathetic companion in times of uncertainty and confusion (Herz & Gallo, 1996; Kaplan, 2007). The best reason for using YAL is that they keep students reading.

2.2 Text Factors Affecting Reading

The layout of a text and how it attracts particular readers to determine the fate of the text. If it is well laid, presentable and suits a reader it will be read and explored. Otherwise, it may remain on the shelf gathering dust. Many features of a text need to be considered, for example, text organization, the font, and length of the text, content, and language difficulty of the text for an effective reading process to take place.

Understanding a text is the product of several interactive factors. Researches have been conducted to examine each variable and find out its effect on one's understanding of a text (Woolley, 2011). According to Kinder and Bursuck (1991), the physical features of the text that are well organized facilitates reading comprehension. Therefore, students can make better predictions, anticipate their learning and comprehend the content being studied (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2010, as cited in Woolley, 2011). Newsom and Gaité (1971) carried out a study on text length. They investigated the learning and retention of prose materials. In their study, subjects read either a 2300-word long passage or a 300-word short passage. The results indicated that participants who read the short passage significantly outperformed those who read the long passage. Similarly, Chujo and Utiyama (2005) believed that text length had a significant effect on text comprehension and is a factor which can contribute to the level of text difficulty; the longer the passage, the more difficult it will be to comprehend.

The findings concluded that the length of a passage affects its level of comprehensibility. Chastain (1988) claimed that teachers usually favor short reading passages because in long reading passages students need to interpret a complex and sometimes unfamiliar linguistic code for which they were required to know all grammar and vocabulary. This resulted in students focussing too much attention on the language as opposed to meaning, and they read much too slowly. Another text variable involving text comprehension is a linguistic difficulty. Linguistic difficulties are judged based on the number of words and sentence length used in a text. This determines the readability level of the text, the grade and the appropriate reading age for students. Students would find a text simple if words and sentences in a text are within their reading ability. Otherwise, they may face difficulties in understanding a text and be demotivated to read.

Students who are classified as advanced might yet not be able to cope with the language of the prose text because it departs from the usual norms of language use. It includes rhetorical devices and metaphors (Lazar, 1993). Hence, Young (2002)

pointed out that language accessibility is important for students to understand a text. Simple phrases or sentence patterns and a limited amount of text on each page provide a reader-friendly experience for English learners. Goodman (1996) added that the more familiar the language of the text is, such as the actions of the characters, the description of the setting and the sequence of events, the closer the readers' predictions will match the author's expression and the easier that text will be for the reader to comprehend.

Paivio (1991) believed that pictures help explain the textual material and allow learners to build bridges between the verbal (text) and non-verbal (illustrations) information. Illustrations positively influence reading comprehension by enabling the reader to construct meaning from the text. Additionally, legibility of a text impact prose reading. Students should be comfortable with the font size of the words while reading. Studies have shown that words with font size 12, would enable a reader to read faster than other sizes. Font sizes smaller than 12 are not appropriate (Pardo, 2001). Larger size fonts are not suitable because the reader's vision would perceive fewer words and consequently the speed of reading decreases (Tinker, 1963). A text which is well-presented in all aspects would attract a reader and evoke his or her interest in reading (Herlina, 2016).

2.3 Reader Factors Affecting Reading

When a text interests the reader, an emotional response is produced (Dipardo & Schnack, 2004, as cited in Woolley, 2011). This response develops students' motivation and contributes to improved attitudes, engagement, and enjoyment with reading. Texts that match students' language ability level, interest, age, gender, and prior knowledge give a positive impact on text comprehension (Kucer, 2001).

However, it must be noted that students who read the same text could end up with a different understanding of the text (Narvaez, 2001). This is because students are different individuals thus they transact the text differently. Researches revealed that the causes of individual differences in text comprehension are reader skill and reader knowledge (prior knowledge). Reader skill concerns basic reading and language abilities such as word recognition, vocabulary, and memory as well as higher-level skills such as reading strategies and forming inferences. Readers with more of these skills are better at comprehending texts (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). This reveals readers' strengths in reading comprehension. Reader knowledge that refers to prior knowledge of a reader is activated during a reading activity and if a reader lacks this knowledge, he or she might misinterpret the text (Narvaez, 2001). This is because the reader's knowledge of language and concepts of the world do not match the text (Goodman, 1996). For a smooth reading process to take place, the combination of the two factors; text and reader should aid students' text comprehension.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed the qualitative research method in collecting and analyzing data. The research question addressed in the study is: *What are the text-reader factors which affect students' reading comprehension?* Interview sessions were conducted to

obtain students' viewpoints on the text-reader factors which promote or hinder reading the prose texts catered for the participants. Thematic analysis was carried out on the interview verbatim transcriptions. Validity and reliability issues were relevantly addressed.

3.2 Participants

Six Form Two students were purposively selected to participate in this study. They scored grade 'B' in the English language subject during their mid-year examination. Participants comprise both genders from different social backgrounds. The students are labeled as Student 1 (S1) to Student 6 (S6) for ease of reference.

3.3 Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was developed to cater to the research questions addressed. The questions were adapted from Janan (2011) focusing on text-reader aspects which influence prose reading. Also included are (i) students' views on prose forms read (ii) background knowledge of the texts read (iii) interest in reading (iv) elements and features of prose texts that help students in reading (v) the purpose of reading, and (vi) preferred literary texts. Probing questions were asked to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions on the type of literary texts which students prefer and issues related to it. The interview questions generally referred to the literary texts prescribed for schools particularly the short story "Cheat" by Allan Baillie.

3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

Individual in-depth interviews were carried out to elicit the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006) of Form 2 students. Each interview was carried out for about 30 to 40 minutes. Verbal consent from the participants and a written agreement were gauged before the interview sessions conducted. The interviews began with small talk to make the participants feel at ease and to establish rapport between the researchers and participants. This was followed by questions to elicit complete knowledge and experience from the participants. The researchers maintained a stance of neutrality where careful considerations were taken to avoid any preconceived ideas and opinions while interviewing to avoid biases.

The researchers acknowledged responses from the participants both verbally and non-verbally so that participants did not lose interest in the conversation. The researchers maintained control of the interview where effective questioning techniques were carried out to collect rich data. The researchers kept track of the questions asked, noting to just one question at a time, verifying unclear responses, asking open-ended questions and using a friendly tone during the session. Wait time was provided. Also, the researchers' body language was appropriate as not to influence the participants in providing the data needed.

Ethical issues, such as participants' identities were protected and care was taken to ensure that none of the information collected embarrassed them. Confidentiality was maintained and the participants were treated with respect. Participants who participated in the study were physically or psychologically unharmed. All personal identification in the recorded scripts was edited out of the verbatim transcriptions.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis procedures. Thematic analysis is a method used for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Relevant data were identified to address the research question developed. The main and sub-themes were then categorized and coded. This process was followed by sorting verbatim units concerning the themes and sub-themes identified. A reliability check with two-panel members followed.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results show that text-reader factors play an important role in prose reading. Generally, these factors affect comprehension of the prose read to ensure an engaging and a meaningful reading process.

4.1 Text Factors

As shown in Figure 1, seven themes emerged from the data examined in text factors that affect reading comprehension. In effect, these factors help participants in the reading process. They are: (i) pictures, (ii) font, (iii) author, (iv) glossary, (v) text organization, (vi) cover, and (vii) length.

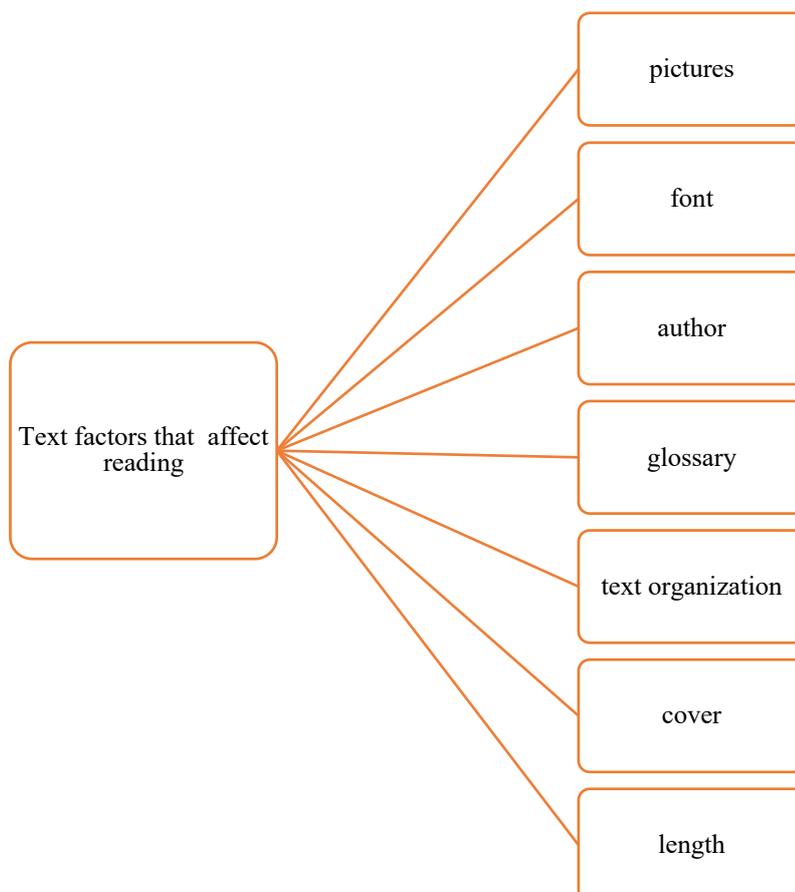


Figure 1. Text factors.

4.1.1 Pictures

Results show that all participants preferred reading prose texts which contain pictures, especially real and colored ones. Pictures must be included for a comprehensive understanding of the plot. According to S4, *“every page must have a picture to understand the story”*. S6 agreed *“... every page must have pictures to understand the plot better, I like color pictures”*. This view is shared by S1 who said, *“put in more colorful pictures. I like real pictures”*. S2 asserted that *“the pictures must be colorful...”* followed by S5 *“pictures must be beautiful and interesting”*. S3 reiterated *“color pictures more interesting”*.

4.1.2 Font

The font size of prints also affects the ease of reading. Generally, the participants were positive about the font size in the prose text which is Times New Roman size 14. They could read as the font is legible. S1 stated, *“I’m fine with it”*. S2 agreed, *“okay, lah. Can. Clear.”* S3 affirmed, *“okay, I can read”* followed by S4 *“yes, teacher, words okay.”* S5 ensured, *“yes, I’m okay, teacher. I can read, no problem”*. S6 shared the same view, *“the words I can read, teacher”*.

4.1.3 Author

The choice of authors is also important to maintain interest in reading the prose texts and ease comprehension. Most of the participants preferred both foreign and local writers because they would be aware of the issues highlighted in the prose locally and abroad. *“It does not matter but I must understand the story and it must be interesting”* (S1). S2 on the other hand, preferred foreign writers, *“because I like to read their ideas because he writes something that happens in his country so...ehm ahm we know what is happening in his country”*.

S3 and S4 preferred both and explained, *“because I will know how the local writers write. The author will only write the issues in this country but we already know the way of life here...if foreign authors their stories will be based on their culture and traditions so we will know their way of living...how they solve each problem that they come across like for example when it involves family problems”* (S3). S4 maintained that *“I like two also, teacher. I can widen my knowledge by knowing the happenings from in and out of the country”*. S5 agreed, *“because if local authors he will only write on Malaysia, Then, if authors from other countries through their stories I will know what and how life in their country. So much can be learned by knowing the issues in and outside of the country”*.

4.1.4 Glossary

All the participants insisted that the glossary section should be included in the prose to ease comprehension. They stressed that it should be below each page of the story for quick reference of difficult words. S1 said, *“then if got difficult words and got meaning below the page, it is better”*. S2 affirmed, *“yes, yes, it is important, teacher”* and explained, *“by this, we will know the meaning of the words ahmm easy to find. I think teacher better below each page it will be easier ...we don’t have to turn*

the pages to the back always. I feel it is a waste of time". S3 insisted, "yes, teacher, should have in every book the glossary. Prefer to be below each page so it will be easy to refer... not at the back". According to S3, "if not we have to always turn the pages to the back which is irritating and uncomfortable". S4 added "... ah... yes, teacher, the glossary must be below each page for easier references. I can refer to it to find the meaning of words".

4.1.5 Text Organization

Text organization is another factor to be considered to ensure reading comprehension among students. All the six participants were satisfied with the text organization, which is written in narrative form. S1 said, "okay it is nice". S2 agreed, "em... emm... yes. It is written in the form of a story" and elaborated, "I like stories then got pictures to explain the story I will understand better." S3 affirmed, "this story is easy to read". S4 stated, "Okay. It is written, as usual, a narrative like often we read". S5 and S6 preferred the narrative form, "Okay, teacher, very okay" (S5), "... like a normal story" (S6).

4.1.6 Cover

The cover of the prose text should also be taken into consideration so that it leaves an impression to potential readers. It should be eye-catching as this would encourage them to pursue reading the contents of the text. The pictures and illustrations made and the color combinations used as shown on the book cover appear to have an impact on readers. S6 pointed out, "this book teacher, the cover not interesting too bright". S2 stressed that the cover of the book "must change". S2 further elaborated, "...this color is not attractive. Must put attractive colors like blue, yellow". S5 shared the same view, "I think the cover must be changed not attractive. The color very bright", and suggested that "pictures must be beautiful and interesting. Ahm....emmm... I like orange, red, yellow and green". S4 added, "cover is very bright, too pinkish teacher... the drawing not attractive".

4.1.7 Length

It is interesting to note that the length of the prose text would either encourage or hamper reading. Nonetheless, it appears that the current prose text used in schools is favored by the participants. The short stories in the text are about five to six pages long. The short story "Cheat" by Allan Baillie, for example, is five pages long. All the participants agreed that the story is not a long read but manageable. S1 said that "Okay... the length is all right for me. It is not too long. Nice". S2 and S3 shared the same view. "Okay, not long" (S2) and S3 stated, "Okay, teacher, can finish".

4.2 Reader Factors

Analysis of data revealed that reader factors do affect the reading process. Three major themes emerged from the data examined on reader factors that affect reading. They are: (i) students' life background, (ii) language proficiency level of students, and (iii) examination.

4.2.1 Students' life background

The students' background before reading prose affects the reading. This is especially so when the themes of the prose read are similar to what they encounter in their daily life. When students have similar experiences as in the story, they can relate these life experiences to the familiar themes and thus understand and remember the story better. S1 affirmed, *"I can...Em...ah, I can remember the story"*. S2 maintained that *"this will stick in my brain and em...I remember the story"*. S3 believed that *"em...ahmm...I could understand the characters and the story"*.

According to the participants the kind of prose selected would determine their interest and motivation to read. At their age, themes centering on teenager issues, family, science fiction, horror, and mystery appear to attract their attention more than others. S1 liked, *"stories that tells teenage problems"*. S2 stated, *"I like the story...about students in school"*. S5 added, *"I like to read teenagers' issues, family and mystery"*. S2 said, *"I like horror, war and science fiction"* followed by S3, *"horror...I like family stories, teenagers and sometimes fairy tales"*. S4 asserted, *"I like an adventure like action, and family stories, I like horror stories"*. S6 favored, *"mystery, science fiction, and horror stories"*.

4.2.2 Language proficiency level of students

The proficiency level of the students would also impact the reading process. While much consideration is made on the selection of the literary texts for schools to meet the proficiency level of the students concerned, there are bound to be students who do not reach the level required before reading. Nonetheless, it is pleasing to note that students are aware of the importance of learning, if not mastering the English language. Therefore, many were positive about it and claimed that they read prose texts to improve the language. S3 stated, *"I read because my English can be better. Widen my knowledge in the English language"*. S4 said, *"I want to read English story books because I can to...ahh...em...em. I can improve my English language"*. S5 affirmed, *"emm...ahmm er I read because I want to improve my English. Now English is important...teacher"*. S6 ascertained that *"if I read English books I can...be better and...I can know more English words, I can speak in English. Then in my composition English, I could construct correct sentences"*. S4 further explained that *"I know more English words and English sentences and I can write correctly"*.

4.2.3 Examination

It is interesting to note that the interest to read prose text is also much examination driven. Participants read prose texts because the text will be tested in the English language examination paper. S2 said, *"because this is in the examination"* and explained, *"even I don't like to read I must read, teacher"*. This was agreed by S3 who felt the same. The participant repeated that *"because the story is in the examination"*. S3 confirmed that if not for the examination, *"no...teacher, I will not read"*. Perhaps this drive to read is explained by S4 who asserted, *"I can answer questions well when I know the story"*. S1 added, *"this will help me in my exam. I remember"*. S2 affirmed, *"yes, teacher. I could answer the examination questions well because I can remember"*.

5. IMPLICATION

Comprehension of texts differs according to individuals. One may not understand a text as what is expected by the author because meaning does not reside on the printed page. Synergy occurs in reading, which combines the words on the printed page with the reader's background knowledge and experiences (Anderson, 1999). Hence, teachers should make the most of reading activities that could activate students' existing background knowledge to comprehend and interpret prose text better. Consequently, the choice of texts must best fit students' reading interest to support their comprehension development. This is because students' reading progress is shaped by their interest to read and their ability to understand what is read. If prose texts do not interest students, they will not be able to understand what they read and are not likely to acquire the skills necessary to participate in classroom teaching and learning activities. These students would lag and a gap among the students would be obvious; the good and poor readers.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study has provided insights into the current literature textbook used for Form Two students in Malaysian schools and the need for careful consideration in future text selection practices. This is especially crucial to maintain students' interest in reading literary materials in English. It is important to note that when text factors affect participants' prose reading, it influences participants' interest, their motivation to read and to understand a particular text. Text-reader factors are inter-related as an imbalance between the factors would hinder the reading process (Janan, 2011). In effect, precautionary measures should be taken to achieve the right balance between the text and the reader for successful and meaningful reading comprehension to take place. When the right balance is found, students not only learn the English language, but they would derive pleasure, wisdom, and delight from their acquaintance with reading prose in literature.

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