Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the alignment between the Malaysian ESL reading curriculum at the Form Four level and its execution at the textbook development level as well as at the instructional implementation level. The findings of the study indicate that there are misalignments between what is proposed in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications and what is proposed in the textbook and executed at the instructional level. The findings of this study have implications on ESL teacher training as well textbook development.

1. Introduction

The problem of reading comprehension in the second language (L2) is a universal phenomenon. Many students all over the world, experience comprehension difficulties (e.g. Cornoldi & Oakhill, 1996; Pressley, 2006), especially when reading in L2. A similar problem is a great concern for Malaysia. In the effort to achieve Vision 2020 to be a fully developed country (The Way Forward: Vision 2020), it is imperative for its citizens, particularly students who are the future leaders of the country to master knowledge in diverse fields. In that quest, mastering the English language is important as according to Graddol (1997), English is one of the major languages used in
the world’s yearly book production. In a more recent research, there were 200,698 (21.8%) titles of books and 28,131 (45.2%) titles of scholarly articles written in the English language (Lobachev, 2008).

It is apparent that having the ability to read and comprehend information in the English language is important and will assist students in fulfilling their academic requirements. Yet, Pandian (2000) found that nearly 80 percent of secondary school and university students are reluctant readers of English which later would affect their academic performances. Apart from that, Sidek (2009) finds some adverse reading attitudes towards reading in English among students at a Malaysian public university. They perceived that reading in English is a daunting task and they easily give up because they do not understand most of the words in the text. It was also found that many students do not have the capability to analyse, synthesise or evaluate information (David & Govindasamy, 2006). These skills are very important especially to survive at the tertiary level, once they complete their secondary schooling.

In relation to the problems of reading in the English language in Malaysia, the present study attempted to examine if the English language reading curriculum and its instructional implementation could be one of the reasons for such problem. Minglin Li (2010) finds that EFL teachers were not following the instructions in the national English curriculum to guide their classroom teaching, which shows that there is a gap between the curriculum policy and practical teaching situations, which situation might defeat the goal of the curriculum. Hong Wang (2010) reveals a discrepancy between policy-makers’ intentions and administrators’ implementation which points to the critical role that the department heads as middle-level administrators must play in translating policies into practice.

In the Malaysian setting, previous studies often highlight students’ poor reading proficiency (e.g. Krishnan, Rahim, Marimuthu, Abdullah & Jusoff, 2009; Faizah, Zalizan & Norzaini, 2002; Ponniah, 1993), but very few focuses on the issue of reading curriculum and its alignment with instructional implementation (e.g. Sidek, 2011). Hence, the present study examined the alignment of reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document, the Form Four English Language textbook and the instructional implementation with regard to the curriculum goal in preparing students for reading at the higher education level. The findings of the study will have implications on language policy makers, textbook writers as well as on teacher education trainings.

2. Research Approach

The current study adopted Sidek’s (2011) framework for method of analysing the teaching of reading, a revised version of Richards and Rogers’ (2001) model on the method of analysis for language teaching. The framework proposed that language instruction can be analysed by looking at three main aspects namely the ‘Approach’ (foundational theory), ‘Design’ (e.g. language skills, learning tasks) and ‘Procedure’ (e.g. teacher interviews, classroom techniques, classroom observation).

For the present study, only the elements of ‘Design’ and ‘Procedure’ levels of Sidek’s (2011) framework were relevant. At the ‘Design’ level, the types of reading tasks in the English Language Curriculum specifications document and in the Form Four English Language textbook were analysed while at the ‘Procedure’ level, the types of reading tasks in several reading comprehension classroom observations were examined.

3. Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to find out the alignments among the reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document, the Form Four English Language textbook, and in the Form Four English reading comprehension instructional implementation. The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. Are the reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document in alignment with the reading tasks in the Form Four English language textbook?

2. Are the reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document in alignment with the reading tasks in the Form Four English reading comprehension instructional implementation?

3. Are the reading tasks in the Form Four English Language textbook in alignment with the reading tasks in the Form Four English reading comprehension instructional implementation?

4. **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

   Several past studies (e.g. Beck & McKeown, 2001) have shown that students’ reading abilities are shaped to a certain extent by the types of reading tasks assigned to them. The present study adopted the reading task coding used by Anderson, Bachman, Perkin and Cohen’s (1991), which classifies reading tasks into three categories namely ‘identifying main ideas’, ‘identifying details’ and ‘drawing inferences’. In addition, the researchers developed an extra category of ‘others’ for reading tasks that did not fit into Anderson, et al.’s (1991) categorisation.

   To answer the research questions, the present study extracted reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003), in the Form Four English language textbook and also from classroom observations on ESL reading comprehension lessons. The data collected from the three sources were analyzed using straightforward percentages and compared in order to determine the alignments.

5. **Findings**

   The alignment between curriculum and its implementation is important in order to ensure that the curriculum meets its goal (e.g. Sidek, 2011). In the present study, it was generally found that the types of reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications were not in alignment with the ones in the Form Four English Language textbook and also with the instructional implementation in reading comprehension lessons. Table 1 shows the percentages of types of reading tasks analysed in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document, the Form Four English Language textbook and the instructional implementation of reading comprehension lessons. Detailed findings of the study are presented according to the research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documents / Main Types of Reading Tasks</th>
<th>Identifying Details (%)</th>
<th>Identifying Main Ideas (%)</th>
<th>Making Inference (%)</th>
<th>Others (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Textbook</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observations</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1 Alignment between Reading Tasks in The Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications Document and Reading Tasks in The Form Four English Language Textbook

For the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document and the Form Four English textbook, it was found that the reading tasks on ‘Identifying Details’ were not at all in alignment. In the textbook, the tasks of ‘Identifying Details’ were nearly doubled compared to the ones in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document. The other three task types namely ‘Identifying Main Ideas’, ‘Making Inference’ and ‘Others’ were partially in alignment. Table 2 shows the full figure.

Table 2
Reading Task: Alignment between Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications and Form Four English Textbook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documents / Main Types of Reading Tasks</th>
<th>Identifying Details (%)</th>
<th>Identifying Main Ideas (%)</th>
<th>Making Inference (%)</th>
<th>Others (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Textbook</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Alignment between the reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document and the reading tasks in the Form Four English reading comprehension instructional implementation

Table 3
Reading Tasks: Alignment between Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications and Classroom Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documents / Main Types of Reading Tasks</th>
<th>Identifying Details (%)</th>
<th>Identifying Main Ideas (%)</th>
<th>Making Inference (%)</th>
<th>Others (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Instruction</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings on the comparison of task types in the Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications and the ones carried out in the classroom during reading comprehension lessons (Table 3) found that they were not aligned with each other. Tasks on ‘Identifying Details’ and ‘Identifying Main Ideas’ were much lesser in the curriculum specifications (17% and 25% respectively) but were significantly used in the classroom context (30% and 35%). Conversely, ‘Other’ task types (45% found in the curriculum specifications were used less than half during reading comprehension classes.
5.3 Alignment between the Reading Tasks in The Form Four English Language Textbook in Alignment with the Reading Tasks in The Form Four English Reading Comprehension Instructional Implementation

Moving on to compare the task types in the Form Four English Language textbook and the ones observed in reading comprehension lessons in the classroom, yet again misalignment and partial alignment were detected. Table 4 shows the details.

Table 4
Reading Tasks: Alignment between Form Four English Textbook and Classroom Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Sources / Main Types of Reading Tasks</th>
<th>Identifying Details (%)</th>
<th>Identifying Main Ideas (%)</th>
<th>Making Inference (%)</th>
<th>Others (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Textbook</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observations</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from the main types of reading tasks, the use of reading in the ‘Other’ reading tasks category, shows that reading skill is also used in the teaching and learning of vocabulary, grammar, writing and schemata (e.g. Cunningham, Stanovich & Wilson, 1990). Even in this category, as illustrated in Table 4, the tasks on vocabulary and schemata in the Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications and the Form Four English textbook are found to be just approximately in alignment, while the tasks on grammar, writing and fluency are not in alignment.

Table 5
Other Reading Tasks: Alignment between Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications and Classroom Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documents / Other Types of Reading Tasks</th>
<th>Vocabulary (%)</th>
<th>Grammar (%)</th>
<th>Writing (%)</th>
<th>Schemata (%)</th>
<th>Fluency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Textbook</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same occurrence happens when comparing the reading tasks in the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document and the classroom implementation where the tasks on vocabulary and schemata are approximately in alignment, whereas the tasks on grammar, writing and fluency are not in alignment. A comparison between the Form Four English Language textbook and the classroom implementation shows that the tasks on vocabulary, grammar and writing are not in alignment, whilst the tasks on schemata and fluency are just approximately in alignment (Refer to Tables 6 and Table 7).
Table 6
Other Reading Tasks: Alignment between Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications and Classroom Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Reading Tasks</th>
<th>Vocabulary (%</th>
<th>Grammar (%)</th>
<th>Writing (%)</th>
<th>Schemata (%)</th>
<th>Fluency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Reading Curriculum Specifications</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observations</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
Other Reading Tasks: Alignment between Form Four English Language textbook and Classroom Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Reading Tasks</th>
<th>Vocabulary (%</th>
<th>Grammar (%)</th>
<th>Writing (%)</th>
<th>Schemata (%)</th>
<th>Fluency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Four English Textbook</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observations</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Not in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately in Alignment</td>
<td>Approximately In Alignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Discussion
These findings of the study reveal that at the Design stage of the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document as well as in the Form Four English language textbook, and at the instructional implementation level, the three main reading tasks categories of ‘identifying main ideas’, ‘identifying details’ and ‘making inference’ are established to be the main significant types of reading tasks being emphasised in the Form Four English language subject. In addition, reading is also used in delivering other subordinate skills. Nevertheless, the distribution of the task types indicates that there is a misalignment – some major and some minor, both at the design and implementation stages. For example, certain task types are emphasized in the curriculum document but are found less in the textbook and during the instructional implementation. This misalignment, though may not be surprising, requires particular attention as many Malaysian students face comprehension problems when reading in English (e.g. Krishnan, Rahim, Marimuthu, Abdullah & Jusoff, 2009; Faizah, Zalizan & Norzaini, 2002; Ramaiah, 1996; Ponniah, 1993). Thus, there is a need for a coherent integrated curriculum that combines content and comprehension instruction (Block and Pressley, 2002 cited in Grabe, 2004).

Based on the findings, it is therefore suggested that textbook writers be more vigilant and aware of what is specified in the curriculum specifications document when producing textbooks. Also, relevant parties (e.g. Teacher Training Division) can plan more directed trainings for teachers regarding the teaching of reading comprehension which conform to the curriculum in order to meet its national goals.
7. Conclusion

The study embarked to examine the alignment of types of reading tasks among the Form Four English Language Curriculum Specifications document, the Form Four English Language textbook and the instructional implementation level. The findings reveal that there are misalignments between what is proposed in the curriculum and what is offered in the textbook, and what is executed at the instructional level. The study has implications on the areas of teacher training and textbook writing in terms of conforming to what is specified in the curriculum specifications document in meeting the goals of the national curriculum.

Acknowledgement

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References


