

READING & CULTURE; THE CONNECTION

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Abstract: Reading is one of the essential skills needed to be literate. Reading abilities allow learners to gain new information, widen knowledge and improve communication and language skills. However, the education system in Malaysia is still facing the issue of reading incompetency among pupils especially on reading comprehension. This case study aimed to identify the factors that affect reading comprehension ability of Year 3 Orang Asli pupils of Temuan tribe. The respondents involved five years 3 pupils from a primary school located in Shah Alam, Selangor and one parent for each pupil. They were chosen through purposive sampling based on their background as Orang Asli and their low proficiency level. The research instruments used for this study were field notes, document analysis, and individual semi-structured interview of the pupils and the parents. The main findings show that the cultural background does contribute to the reading comprehension challenges of the respondents. The implication derived from this study is that teachers need to be made aware of the reasons for reading comprehension challenges among the Orang Asli pupils in order for them to be able to integrate the suitable reading comprehension strategies in the ESL teaching and learning activity.

Keywords: Reading Abilities, Orang Asli, Reading Competency, Culture, Reading Difficulties

Introduction

English is regarded as a second language as declared by the Malaysian government. However, according to Iber (2016), there are three categories of English speaking Malaysians; 1) people whose English is their first language; 2) Malaysians who are exposed to a high-frequency use of English in schools and urban environments; 3) foreign language learners who consider English as the third or fourth language that they are trying to master. This research aimed to go deeper into

understanding the pupils who consider English as a foreign language and are having difficulties in reading comprehension.

Problem Statement

Reading is one of the essential skills needed to be literate. Reading abilities allows learners to gain new information, widen their knowledge and improve their communication and language skills. However, the education system in Malaysia still faces the issue of reading incompetency among students. This situation arose because of the failures in the early stages of reading (Mohd Mokhtar Thar et al. 2010). There are numerous sorts of reading difficulties that a learner can face. For example, Ghanaguru et al. (2003) highlighted through her research two main reading problems which are the pupils' incomprehension besides poor motivation to a lack of experience or inadequate prior knowledge and a limited or subjective view of what is read and also lack of prior knowledge to help students make connections to the text. Reading comprehension difficulties existence among Malaysians is clearly evident.

Studies had been conducted to prove the existence of reading comprehension problems among Malaysians with various causes. Besides, studies on the cause of cultural background to the effect of lagging in education among Orang Asli pupils have also been highlighted. However, there is yet to be more specific research to correlate the cultural background and the challenges in reading comprehension. Due to lack of studies being done, the researcher would like to fill the gap by exploring .the factors affecting reading ability among Year 3 Temuan Tribe pupils in Shah Alam.

The paper provides the results of the study which is to identify the factors that affect reading ability of Year 3 Orang Asli pupils of Temuan tribe.

Research Objective

To identify the factors that affect reading comprehension ability of Year 3 Orang Asli pupils of Temuan tribe.

This study enables teachers to be aware of the problems faced by the pupils in reading comprehension and it is hoped that the findings of the study will help them to look for suitable reading strategies to cater to the needs of the pupils.

Literature Review

This section is the literature review of this study.

Reading and Reading Comprehension

Grabe (2003) defined reading as an interactive process among readers and texts that result in reading fluency where he believed that readers interact with texts as they try to extract meaning. Meanwhile, reading is also defined as a thinking process that involves recognizing words from written texts to construct meaning (Anderson et al. 1985).

Rice (2014), considered that comprehension is the process of eliciting and making meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. This corresponds with a description from Clarke et al. (2014) which stated that reading comprehension comprises of several different skills and processes that involved in processing text with the purpose to get an understanding of

the text rather than to acquire meaning from individual words or sentences. As reading is a receptive skill in language learning, it requires an active cognitive involvement which explains the existence of content schemata.

Theoretical Framework

The primary underpinning theory related to this study is the Schema Theory.

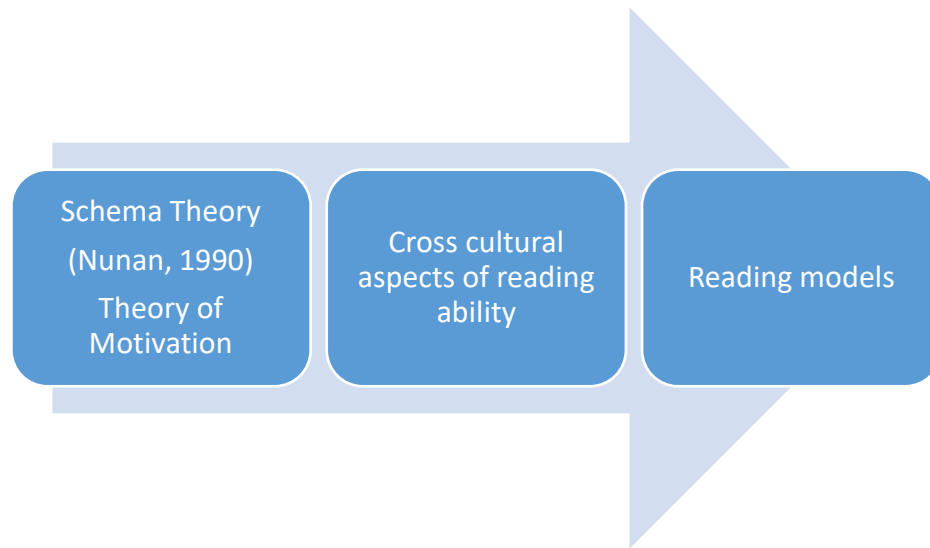


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Schema Theory

The process of readers making meaning from the reading text involves the readers' content schemata. Clapham (1996) believed that the more knowledge and familiar the readers on the subject they are reading, the readers will be able to gain information from the text effortlessly. Bernhardt (2005) also suggested that texts which contain culturally familiar content have the facilitating effect for both the reading comprehension process. Through this, it can be deduced that, for a person to be an efficient reader, one must be familiar with the subject area. This is supported by Williams (1997) who believed that giving the learners to read an unfamiliar text and expect them to understand it is unlikely. Without prior knowledge, it is difficult for readers to extract information from the text.

Adams and Collins (1977) argued that even though when the component levels of processing appear to be organized hierarchically when the accomplishment of reading is analyzed by the recognition of the letters, clauses, phrases, and sentences, readers read a meaningful passage, not reading its component letters, words, and sentences in isolation. Therefore, it is best to use interactive model, which combines the two techniques. In addition, it is believed that individual words are recognized more easily when they are embedded in meaningful sentences (Tulving & Gold, 1963, Schubert & Eimas, 1977 as cited in Adams and Collins, 1977) and unfamiliar words may be processed more easily if they are embedded in a familiar story (Wittrock, Marks, & Doctorow, 1975 as cited in Adams and Collins, 1997). This corresponds to the pupils' condition where they are having difficulties to read due to their inability to recognize letters. At the age of

nine years old, the pupils should be able to recognize letter. However, the pupils did not, hence, they are having problems in reading comprehension. Moreover, in this study, the text introduced by the teacher was unfamiliar to them. They had no prior knowledge on the vocabulary introduced by the teacher. Therefore, the pupils' were having difficulties to understand the content.

Methodology

The following section is about the research design, the participants, research instruments, and procedures and how the study was conducted.

Research Design

The research design used is qualitative. Cresswell (2014) stated that qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding or groups ascribe to a social or human. In order to identify the factors that influences the reading comprehension challenges, a case study method was adopted. Zaidah (2007) defines a case study as an in-depth study method used to narrow down a very broad field of research into one easily researchable topic. She further explained case study as a method which allows a researcher to analyse the data within a specific context closely as in most cases, a case study method covers a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of study as it aims to investigate the contemporary real-life phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions, and their relationships (Zaidah, 2017). In conjunction with these criteria, the researcher case study was conducted in one of the schools in Shah Alam on 10 respondents to understand the issue deeper as Yin (2003) believed that a case study is best to explore and understand an issue deeper. Besides that, a case study prevents a manipulation of data as the data collected were through direct encounters with the respondents over individual interviews, field notes and document analysis.

Setting

The setting for this study is in one of the schools in Shah Alam. The school is located near the Orang Asli settlement. Although there are several other schools in the area, Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JKOA) has instructed for all the pupils to attend this particular school. They intend to gather every child in one school to ease any affairs with them. The headmaster of the school stated that: *"The JKOA wants every Orang Asli children to be gathered in our school. It makes it easier for them if they have any events or announcement for them. It will also be easier for them to monitor the progress of the children"*. Therefore, it is easier for the research to be conducted as everyone is gathered in the same school.

There were more than 1504 pupils. The Orang Asli pupils from the Temuan tribe is only 2% of the population. Most of the Orang Asli parents are illiterate and do not see education as an important matter. As the parents did not see the importance of education, the Orang Asli pupils are having difficulties in learning especially in the English language which is considered a foreign language for them. The participants' first language is the Temuan language and their second language is the Malay language.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to choose because the researcher intended to have the participants based on the set criteria. As mentioned in Emmel (2013) purposive sampling is known as judgmental, selective, or subjective, and it is carried out based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. In this research, five Year 3 pupils were chosen through purposive

sampling based on several characteristics. First, all the participants are from the Temuan tribe aged nine years old with a low proficiency level. Their proficiency level was determined through their past screening test (LINUS) result. Other than that, they were chosen as all of them are in the same class which one of the researchers is the class teacher and their English language teacher. This is to ensure that the researcher has ample time with the pupils to observe them during teaching and learning processes. In the class, only 5 of them are from the same cultural background while another 34 of them are Malay pupils.

Instruments

This case study employed individual semi-structured interview, field notes and document analysis as the research instruments. Triangulation of three research instruments were used to ascertain the reliability of the data. While conducting research, the type of research instruments must be determined in order to collect data. To triangulate and corroborate the data, multiple research instruments were used in this study, which were semi-structured interviews, field notes, and document analysis. Triangulation is important as it assures the validity and reliability of the data acquired.

Field Notes

For this case study, classroom observations were used as one of the instruments to collect data. According to Smart et al. (2013), observation is a way of gathering data by watching behavior, events, or noting physical characteristics in their natural setting. This instrument is used to assist the researcher's understanding by observing the participants rather than depending only on the data gathered from the interview. Classroom observations were conducted and documented as field notes. The observation was conducted in the classroom when the teaching and learning took place. It was to observe the pupils when they were reading and answering the questions asked by the teacher on the text given. The data collected from the field notes is intended to be used to triangulate the result for this research.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research instruments where it functions as concrete evidence that can be interpreted by the researcher (Bowen, 2009). The data analysis in this study is the pupils' screening test and exercise book. The data is used to prove that the pupils are having difficulties in their reading ability. The data from the document analysis were then used to verify together with other forms of data.

Semi-Structured Interview

Individual interviews were conducted to collect the data. The interview is conducted to the five participants and five participants' parent at the classroom and their houses respectively for approximately 10 minutes for each respondent. The interview questions were developed to provide information on the participants' lifestyle and the use of English at home. The purpose of the interview was to elicit more information from the respondent. The participants' name was not mentioned to ensure their confidentiality as Leong and Austin (2006) stated that the name of participants is best to be kept confidential to protect their privacy. Data from the interviews were transcribed. The interview was conducted in the Malay language as the participants could not understand the English language at all. Therefore, to gain more accurate data, the language used should be the one that the participants are comfortable with so that they can answer the questions proposed well (Leong & Austin 2006).

Results and Discussion

This section is the results acquired in identifying the factors that contributes to the reading comprehension challenges faced by the pupils.

Research Question

What are the factors that contribute to the difficulties in reading ability faced by the Year 3 Orang Asli pupils of Temuan tribe?

This research question is answered after the data were collected mainly via Semi Structured Individual Interview and Field Notes.

The Socio Economic Background of The Pupils

The Temuan Tribe pupils have poor educational performance in Malaysia due to their poverty. This is supported in Nicholas (2006) where he wrote that according to the Ministry of Education, the high poverty rates and the tendency to live in remote locations were among the reasons that the Orang Asli pupils has low literacy and numeracy base in Year 1 as their enrolment in preschool were low. Based on the demographic profile of the pupils it can be evident that all participants did not attend preschool. They started their school in Year 1 primary school, hence explaining the inability to read comparing to other Malay pupils in the classroom. Besides that, the language spoken the most by the participants before they entered the primary school is Temuan Language hence making it their mother tongue. Malay language can be considered as their second language as they used them only to communicate with teachers and their friends in school. During the interview, one of the participants pointed out that;

“At home, I speak Temuan with my family but I use Malay Language if I went to the shops or with my friends. They did not understand me if I speak Temuan. They only know Malay language. “

This showed that their mother tongue is Temuan and their second language is Malay language. As mentioned by Wong and Abdillah (2018), Bahasa Malaysia which is the medium of instruction in the national education system is not the mother tongue for most Orang Asli students. Through this, it can be concluded that English is not the participants’ second language but their third which made English as a Foreign Language for them. Learning a foreign language can be challenging for them when they did not have the basic literacy. Based on the field notes taken during the classroom observation, the pupils were not able to respond to the teachers and were unable to write when being asked by the teacher.

In addition, during the interview, it was found that the pupils who live in their hut had no electricity at home. Hence, they were unable to do anything at night. One of the participants mentioned that;

“I do not have electricity at home. We use the gasoline at night but my friend’s house has electricity and television. If I want to watch television, I will go to his house. Sometimes my mother allowed me to go sometimes she did not. ”

This situation did not only happen in Shah Alam but it also happened in other Orang Asli settlement as researched by Wong and Abdillah (2018) where they found that there was no electricity during the day and night for the Orang Asli pupils to do their studies and other activities.

They also mentioned that the pupils had no access or money to buy educational toys, reading materials or watch educational programmes on television. This corroborate with the findings during the interview. One of the participants pointed out that;

“I do not go to tuition. My parents said we did not need to go to tuition. We can just learn in schools. I do not want to go to tuition either. I want to play. If I go to tuition, I need to learn. It’s boring.”

When being asked about homework, the pupils had no interest in doing that. This is because, they do not understand the homework and there was no source for them to refer. When the parents are being interviewed, they mentioned that;

“I also did not know. Nowadays, the lesson were very difficult. I also do not understand.”

“There is no need for tuition. They already learn in school. Besides, tuition is very expensive. Two to three hundred. That’s a month expenses. I can buy groceries with that money.”

This can be concluded that due to their low level of income, and the literacy of the parents, whom did not see the importance of education, the participants’ parents did not bother to invest more money on education.

When the participants did not receive the adequate emotional and financial support from their surroundings, the pupils will be less motivated and lose the passion and interest to pursue education. Hence, it can be seen that motivation plays a very important role in education.

The Introduction of The English Language to The Pupils

Based on the individual semi-structured interview conducted, it is believed that the pupils are not exposed to the English language at home. The pupils’ first and second language is Temuan and Malay. They first learned to know the existence of the language at school. English is not a second, but a foreign language for them. Hence, it is not very significant for them. One of the participants stated that:

“I have never heard of the English language before. I have only heard of Malay language. When my mother went to the shop, the shop keeper speaks in the Malay language. I do not understand why I have to learn the English language. We are not going to use it”.

This proves that the pupils were not exposed to the English language until they entered a primary school where the English language is one of the compulsory subjects.

Comparing Orang Asli to Malay pupils, the Orang Asli pupils are being left behind as there are no efforts from parents to educate their children. When the pupils enter the school, everything seems very difficult for them. With no support from parents, the pupils are losing their interest and giving

up as they are not able to cope with the syllabus in primary school. At the age of nine years old, the inability to read will slow them down in every subject. The Malay pupils have more supporting parents and environment. They are enrolled in kindergarten and are being taught letters and numbers as early as six years old (UNESCO, 2006). Hence, there is quite a number of gaps in their content knowledge.

In the class, it is noted that, when being asked about the meaning of the words that had just been introduced by the teacher, the pupils could not give the correct answers, instead grinning and shrugging their shoulders. Orang Asli pupils live in an area where their settlements are the forest. Therefore, their content knowledge is limited to things that can be found in their surroundings. During the classroom observations, the teacher has used a text about sea creatures such as turtle, sea horse, starfish, jellyfish, and shark. The pupils did not recognize these sea animals as they live in the forest. The only sea creatures that they recognized were the ones that can be found in the market. When they received the text, they only stared at the text. When the teacher asked, they could not answer as they were unable to read the text given.

In addition, when they did not have prior knowledge on the subject, they lose interest, and it became difficult for them on top of not recognizing the letters. This corresponds to the schema theory where it believed that the prior knowledge of the pupils is important to assist in reading comprehension. This can be concluded that as the pupils' culture is different from the English culture, there were some things that they did not understand. The failure of them to associate the words with their existing knowledge has contributed to the difficulties faced by them to understand hence making them lose interest to learn the language.

The result is therefore consistent with the findings of many related studies where it is agreed that as a receptive skill, reading needs knowledge from the readers to be able to comprehend as unfamiliar content would not help the readers to comprehend easily. (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Hedieh Yousef et al., 2014; Xiaoling Yang, 2017; Ibrahim & M. Sabatin, 2013). Therefore, in this study, it can be argued that due to the difference in cultural content, the pupils were having difficulties in understanding the words given.

The Participants' Perception of English language

Based on the interviews conducted, the pupils' parents did not see the importance of the English language. One of the parents stated,

"I have heard of the English language, but I do not understand them. Is it compulsory to learn the language? I don't mind if my children failed the subject. As long as they know how to read (Malay language) and count".

During the interview with the parents, it is noted that the pupils speak in Temuan language with their parents. However, in class, they speak in the Malay language as they need to communicate with other Malay pupils in the class. As English is their third language, the pupils were never heard to be speaking in the language at all.

In accordance with their lifestyle, going to school is not as important as teaching life survival to their children. The parents let the pupils decide whether they want to come to school or not. If they

are absent from school, they usually follow the parents to work or stay at home. As the parents are small businessmen, there is no problem for them to bring their children along. One of the parents mentioned that:

“I don’t care if they want to go to school or not. I do not know how to write my name. There is no point in forcing them. It’s okay, teacher. If he wants to learn, he will go to school. If not, I will bring him with me”.

Corroborate with the school’s attendance book, the pupils’ attendance had never exceeded 15 days in a month with no solid reasons from parents regarding their children absentees. Their absence was also observed during the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Besides that, when the pupils were asked about the possession of any English books, the only English books they have is the English textbook received from the school. All the pupils stated:

“We only have an English textbook. My father never bought me any English books.”

They were not interested in the English language at home as they could not understand even a word in the language. In addition, 3 out of 5 participants barely recognized alphabets. This is proven through the screening test result where all of them failed some of the constructs in the screening test. Through this, it can be concluded that the parents and the pupils are not aware of the importance of the English language. Due to their background as small businessmen, the important aspects for them are their children are able to read, write and count only as their life survival.

Conclusion

This section will provide the implications, recommendations and summary of this study for ESL learners, teachers, and administrators.

Implications

EFL Learners

It was found in this study, that the cultural background was the factor that influenced the reading ability of the pupils. This study will allow the pupils to learn according to their needs and ability in order to attract and motivate them in learning English.

Teachers

From the results and discussions, it can be concluded that the cultural background of the pupils does contribute to the challenges in reading among the year three pupils of Orang Asli of Temuan tribe to a certain extent.

As teachers, it is crucial to ensure the reading text given is simple and suitable for the pupils’ level. It is crucial to lowering the level of the text to the pupils’ capacity to encourage them to understand the text. Difficult reading text will only trigger their frustration which leads to them, giving up reading. Hence, the teacher should be very selective in choosing the reading text. Research by Arias (2007) suggested that there are six criteria that can be used in selecting the reading text.

However, there are three most suitable criteria to be used in selecting reading text for the participants which are the pupils' level, background knowledge, and interest.

Teachers need to consider these three main criteria. Teachers need to be aware of the pupils' proficiency level when selecting reading text as enquiring the pupils' to read texts that goes beyond their level might be counterproductive for pupils' may develop anxiety at first sight of the text. For instance, the text should not be long with many vocabularies in the text. Instead, teachers can introduce a short text, with simple and repetitive words. The second criteria for text selection are the background knowledge of the pupils. For example, as the Orang Asli pupils live in the forest, teachers could introduce the topics that revolve around them. When they are familiar with the words, they will feel attracted to learn as it will spark the interest of them knowing they have some knowledge on the topics. This leads to the last criteria which are the pupils' interest. When teachers select a reading text within the pupils' content knowledge, it will capture the interest of the pupils and make the reading comprehension process pleasant for the pupils.

Other than that, in school, teacher can put an extra effort to match the pupils' needs. According to Wong and Abdillah (2018), the pedagogy and ways of learning of the Orang Asli pupils are different compared to the normal pupils. They explained that research indicates that Orang Asli children learn differently compared to other Malaysian children. They believed that Orang Asli pupils learn through the aboriginal language, arts, rituals, folklore and taboos which has no fixed syllabus or timetable of learning. (Endicott, 2016; Karubi et al., 2013; Nicholas, 2006 as cited in Wong & Abdillah). Hence, the current curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Education is not suitable for them. Therefore, teachers can take this aspect into consideration in designing the lesson plan for them.

Administrators

Through this study, it was found that the parents of the pupils were not aware of the importance of education. This study allows the administrators of the school to take suitable measures to educate the parents on the importance of education for their children.

Besides that, the existing teacher training program also does not prepare teachers and educators for the difficulties of working with Orang Asli communities (Wong & Abdillah, 2018). Even though JAKOA provides the educational assistance for the Orang Asli, the helps are still insufficient for the pupils. Based on this, it is recommended for the policy makers to add the extra syllabus in the teacher training program specifically in catering the needs of Orang Asli pupils in schools.

Another measure that can be taken by the policy makers is to provide hostels for the pupils with lack of basic necessities. For the pupils to be able to learn efficiently, their basic needs have to be fulfilled for them to be prepared to learn new things. A hostel will not only be providing the basic necessities, but also allow them to come to school every day and focus on education.

Recommendations For Future Research

The results of this study may drive other researchers to investigate further the factors that affect the reading ability of the Temuan Tribe Year 3 pupils. As this study used a case study approach, it only involved a small number of participants. For a more accurate result, it is recommended for

the other researchers to further explore this topic by expanding the number of respondents and changing the method from qualitative to quantitative method. This is because, the quantitative method could be applied for a bigger sample size to gain significant findings.

Besides that, instead of a case study, further researchers can use multiple case study to compare the findings can be made. Future researchers can choose schools or institutions with homogeneous or different characteristics. Findings can be analysed by comparing different types of research sites or research sites from different states.

Summary and Closure

This research was conducted to a Year 3 pupils of Orang Asli Temuan Tribe in Shah Alam to identify the factors that affect the reading ability. The findings of the study determined that cultural background is one of the factors that influenced the pupils' reading ability. In addition, it also highlighted that the pupils need the motivation to encourage them to learn English. Having prior knowledge can function as motivation for the pupils.

In conclusion, the cultural background of the pupils does influence the reading challenges faced by the participants but only to a certain extent. There might be other factors that affect the reading ability that has been overlooked. In facing this kind of problems, teachers play the most significant role in ensuring the pupils to be able to improve themselves in the language. Nevertheless, this case study is limited to only five Year 3 pupils. Hence, the results did not represent the whole tribe.

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