

# Reading Behaviour and the Influence of Reading on the English Language Proficiency at UiTM Sabah

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## ABSTRACT

*In general, UiTM students are often said to be weak in the English Language. In this study, the students' home and their former school experience, their motivations and attitudes towards their English Language proficiency were investigated. Pre-diploma students answered the questionnaires and the data were analysed by looking into the frequency count, mean, standard deviation and correlations between the variables. The results of the analysis displayed that homes and schools of the respondents were the contributing factors to their English Language competency. The implications of these results are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *avoidance in reading, home literacy, supplementary reading*

## Introduction

Many factors contribute towards the low proficiency of the English language among our students. One of them is the reading behaviour of students. Naturally students who read more in English will have better English proficiency level than students who do not read.

In a survey carried out by the National Library in 1996, the average Malaysians read only two books a year. It was reported that Malaysians have poor reading habits and that "something has to be done fast." That was why the Education Ministry came up with the NILAM (Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca or Sapphire) Programme in 1998 to nurture the importance of reading habits

among students. Several studies have shown that the educational system in Malaysia encourages rote learning i.e. memorizing texts and Malaysians are urged to change (Chitravellu, 1997; Osman, 1997).

In Malaysia, special emphasis is placed on raising the literacy level by teaching people to read. However, another problem has emerged among university students. Capable students who scored good grades in the language choose not to read. Pandian (1990) used the term "Reading Reluctancy" to illustrate students who are capable of reading but choose not to read. This avoidance in reading has replaced illiteracy and is posing threat to social-economic and educational levels. At UiTM Sabah, students who can read including students whose language is weak choose not to read.

Pandian (1990) stressed that if the problem of students' avoidance in reading is ignored; it is an expensive problem for parents, teachers, and ultimately the nation. He emphasized that reading is as important as reading comprehension and word analysis skills. According to Strickler and Eller (1976), to overlook this problem will only result in creating a generation of non-readers or "illiterate literates."

The present study was galvanised by the poor performance of UiTM students from the Sabah Campus. The purpose of this research was to find out about the students' home and school environments, their motivations and attitudes towards their English Language proficiency.

The results of this study may help lecturers refine and redefine their teaching approach to students of UiTM.

## **Literature Review**

Studies on the reading habits of students have shown that the illiteracy rate in Malaysia is high (Leong & Fung, 1992; Frank, 1996). Research has shown that students with families have ability and habits of children. Non-reading adults are the models for their children who will in turn become non-readers themselves. This vicious cycle goes on from one generation to another. Families foster many experiences that affect reading. Family members influence reading behaviours, habits and attitudes. Children observe their parents who read and thus value reading. Children who grow up in homes where reading is not emphasized have a different view on the value of reading (Heath 1983 in Aebersold & Field, 1997).

Parents' educational level, uses of print in the home, the number of books in the home, and the frequency of parent-child storybook reading events in children's reading achievement in school are significant factors for language and literacy development. Hiebert (in Gates 2000) advocated that parents who involve their young children with print, such as pointing out words on signs, reading to the child, or actual instruction in letter naming are the predictor of the

home experiences. Gates (2000) maintained that home is an “essential locus” of knowing print for young children.

To develop a true desire to read, the most effective motivation is to allow students to choose the books themselves (Jamnik, 2006). Frequent reading is correlated with a positive attitude towards reading. Students who find reading easy, enjoyable and interesting enjoy reading. The experiment conducted by Jamnik (2006) found out that children prefer reading when they can talk about the books with other readers and that free choice of books is a contributing factor in encouraging students to read on their own. It was reported that teachers’ learning goal orientation in the classroom affected the students’ self-efficacy (Roeser, Midgley, and Urdan 1996 in Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Students will do what their teachers expect of them. If teachers believe that understanding the work is more important than just getting the right answers, their students are likely to.

Since there is only a dearth of research done on students’ reading behaviour in Malaysia especially at UiTM Sabah Campus, little is known about this specific population. It is hoped that the findings of the present research will benefit first, the course designers to improve on the syllabi of the English courses and second, the lecturers, to influence their students to read extensively.

## **Methods and Materials**

The subjects of this study were students from the pre-Commerce and pre-Science Programmes. As the students undertaking this course were fresh from school, this would explain the root cause of students’ language proficiency. The subjects’ mother tongue is mainly Malay and some other indigenous dialect such as Kadazan, Dusun, and Brunei.

This study examined the reading habits in relation to students’ home and school backgrounds. Comparing the reading behaviour of the two subjects, Pre-Commerce and Pre-Science students, was out of the scope of this study.

A total of 254 students taking BEL020/030 and BEL040 from Universiti Teknologi Sabah campus participated in the study. The subjects comprised 72 students from the Tawau branch campus and 182 students from the Kota Kinabalu campus.

Prior to the research, a pilot study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the instrument. 35 students taking BEL250 and 28 students taking BEL200 from UiTM Sabah were the respondents in the first pilot.

The research did not look into the school environment especially the schools’ libraries, reading facilities and the English reading materials in the libraries. However, the correlations between teachers and peers’ influence, students’ motivation and attitude towards the learning of the language and peer influence were included.

## Results and Discussion

The result of the study was tabulated and analysed using SPSS version 12.0 software. SPM English or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia 1119 score for English was used as a benchmark in this study to determine the level of the students' English Language proficiency. Students undertaking the Pre-Commerce and Pre-Science Programmes at UiTM Sabah campus are Cs and Ds students.

For the purpose of the study, the respondents were categorized as Low, Average and High English Language Achievers. Respondents who scored A and B in the SPM English language were categorized as High Achievers, those who scored C and D were categorized as Average Achievers, and D and F, Low Achievers.

Newspapers are most readily available in most of the respondents' homes (2.78) and this is followed by English reading materials (2.73). The results show that when these students were young, their parents rarely read to them (1.30) or gave them books as presents (1.33). The same happened to the respondents' siblings who also infrequently read or bought books as gifts. This clearly indicates that parents who are seldom seen reading at home and who do not emphasize reading will produce a generation of non-readers.

Half of these subjects (49.6%) either did not have or had only a few copies of English materials in their homes. From this figure, we can confidently deduce that these students are from families that do not emphasize the importance of reading.

Table 1: Number of English Reading Materials at home

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
None	14	5.5	5.5	5.5
1-10	112	44.1	44.1	49.6
Valid 11-50	80	31.5	31.5	81.1
51-100	25	9.8	9.8	90.9
more than 100	23	9.1	9.1	100.0
Total	254	100.0	100.0	

The respondents did find that their secondary school teachers encouraged students to read for pleasure more than their primary school teachers. This implies that when students do not see their teachers or friends reading, they do not have the role models to emulate and they find reading uninteresting. There is also no emphasis on the use of the library as there are no library periods in most schools. These findings have justified why students have the perception

that their school environment contributed little to their language achievement. These results also are entirely consistent with a study by Pandian (1997) who contended that the school environment was not correlated with the language proficiency of the subjects.

The students' English language achievement was highly related to the length of time they spent on reading the English Language materials [ $r = 0.426$ ,  $p = 0101$ ]. The data suggests that students who read and students who shun reading will have different language proficiency.

Out of 254 students, 195 students rarely borrowed books from the library and out of these 195 students, 112 were average in the English Language proficiency and 33 were low achievers. Even the 50 high achievers also rarely borrowed books from the library. The results clearly demonstrate "the lost generation" – a generation whose English has deteriorated tremendously (Ibrahim, Bernama).

The results also show that the respondents' attitude towards the English language had no correlation with their English language achievement. The data suggests that students have the motivation to learn but they do not have the right attitude towards learning the English language. There was a significant difference ( $p = .000$ ) in the home environment of the respondents among the high, average and low English language achievers (significance value  $p < .05$ ). The mean level for the home environment among the high achievers was 41.09 but the average achievers, 34.63 and the low achievers, 31.76. The result is consistent with Rank Small's *The study of Reading Habits in Malaysia* (1996) that reading practice and reading ability have a positive connection with the homes. Whether students are read to or encouraged to read does influence their language development.

## **Conclusion**

Most educators and even parents often have the preconceived notion that learning only takes place at schools. The findings, however, go against the belief. Homes were the deciding factor in students' language development (Pandian, 1990, Gates, 2000 and Simon, B.S. 2001).

One possible explanation is that children spend most of their time at home until they reach their schooling age. The first twelve years are the critical years for language development. If at this critical period, parents involve themselves in their children's learning activities, encourage them to read, and provide a favourable reading environment, their children's flair for the English Language will spill over into the adolescent years (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

The respondents of this study perceived that their schools experiences had little or no influence on their language learning. This is due to the teachers who seldom recommend supplementary reading or set library assignments.

Teachers cannot instil the habit of reading among students if they themselves do not read (Ganakumaran, 2006). Also, students' motivation towards reading is influenced by their teachers' expectation. Students will be more engaged if teachers stress the importance of reading, thereby boosting the reading habit (Roeser, Midgley, and Urdan 1996 in Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). The culture and the atmosphere of the school affect the intelligence and language development of the students (Taylor & Oreiser, 2006). In this study, it is found that students' reading activities influence their mastery of the language. These results are consistent with the previous research (Donahue et al., 1998). Our findings thus lend support for the hypothesis that the amount of time spent on reading affects the language achievement of the learners. For one thing, students notice the language and their vocabulary grows through incidental learning of words and meaningful interaction with the text (Day & Bamford, 2005). It is asserted that children who read every day will become competent readers as their fluency in reading increases especially, when students read in school and are given reading assignment. This kind of daily practice strengthens both literacy habits and literary appreciation (Ratnawati mohd Asraf & Ismail Sheikh Ahmad, 2003). Like other studies, students do realize the significance of the English language in their daily life. Instituted by examination grades or job applications, they learn the language. This confirms findings by Kaur & Thiyagarajah (1999). They are just instrumentally motivated. Theoretically, people who have integrated motivation (motivated to learn because they love the language, admire the culture and want to familiarize with or integrate into the society that speaks the language) are more highly motivated and overall more successful in language learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Norris-Holt, 2001).

The results have important implications for the university. Since reading is an integral part of mastering the language, the importance of reading has to be emphasized. UiTM students, in general, are from non-English speaking homes and have thus missed a literacy-rich home experience. To help these students to improve the English language is to revive the habit of reading.

Students will not read unless the books are discussed and are integrated into their English lessons proper. Books, if carefully selected, will capture and fascinate students' interest. Hence, educators or practitioners should choose books not only tailor to the taste of the students, but also match their language capacity. This is because students' positive attitudes towards reading are mounted by interesting texts (Marrow, 1992; Jamnik, 2006). Although texts are prescribed in other English courses, the English lecturers should also supplement reading assignment or library assignment instead of being bound by the texts and include nothing throughout the semester. Students have always been bogged down by the mechanics of writing, reading skills and grammar. However, students' spontaneous production is often disappointing. More often than not, in their writing, they exhibit the paragraph sense, but not the language.

Supplementing reading materials is therefore necessary not only to address the issue of the non-reading phenomenon, but also help students become aware of how language works as they read. Numerous studies have also attested that ESL learners have to read extensively (Hui, 200; Ratnawati and Ismail, 2003).

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