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EMPOWERING ESL STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY USING AUTHENTIC READING MATERIALS IN A USR OUTDOOR ACTIVITY

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Abstract: *Teaching and motivating secondary school students to read in English Language can be daunting. Therefore, educators of English as a second language are somewhat at a loss to encourage students to read outside the classrooms. This paper shares how second language educators can use authentic reading materials such as Reader's Digest magazine to promote critical reading and creative writing activities among English as a Second Language students in an innovative, critical, fun, and collaborative way outside the classroom. This was done through a university social responsibility (USR) program initiated by the Academy of Language Studies, in collaboration with Reader's Digest magazine. This paper reports a USR program involving 85 secondary students from Sekolah Menengah Agama Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. These students work in groups to do creative writing and critical reading activities outside the classrooms at five checkpoints for two hours. The activities were facilitated by 10 teachers and five lecturers. Findings from the pre- and post-study questionnaires on 85 Form Four and Form Five students show changes in students' reading interest, confidence, understanding and belief after doing the outdoor reading activities, on top of bringing back the joy of reading.*

Keywords: *authentic reading materials, critical thinking, creative writing, Reader's Digest magazines, ESL reading program*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching reading can be very challenging for educators at all levels. Similarly, reading is also the most difficult skill to master for English as a Second Language learners. This challenge is more apparent in the digital age where students prefer to spend time in cyberspace and online tools rather than flipping through magazines (Hopper, 2005). Although reading skills are fundamental in improving other language skills, such as listening, speaking, and writing in English as a Second Language, there is an emphasis on secondary students to hone critical reading skills as preparation before they continue their tertiary education, where English Language is the medium of instruction.

In an English as a second language classroom, heavy reliance on textbooks has restricted critical and creative thinking skills among students. This is made worse by students' attitude toward reading and writing as boring activities. Pandian's (2000) study on reading habits among students in Malaysia showed that 80.1% of students were "less fond" of reading. In another survey on UiTM diploma students, Wan Zumusni, Norhaiyati and Wan Aida (2005), 50% of students were willing to buy Reader's Digest magazine although 32.4% reported that they read newspapers. In another study related to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in Saudi Arabia, Al-Nafisah and Al-Shorman (2017) found that access to reading materials is one of the factors that prevent reading habits among university students.

Therefore, to attract students' attention to reading and writing in English outside of class time, second language educators should use more innovative, and interesting techniques and teaching approach. One way is to adapt and adopt authentic materials as supplementary learning materials for the students.

Authentic texts are defined as "...one 'created to fulfil some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced'. With the onset of the communicative movement, a greater awareness of the need to develop students' skills for the real world has meant that teachers endeavour to simulate this world in the classroom" (Guariento & Morley, 2001, p: 347).

Reader's Digest magazines are chosen not because it is an international family magazine, targeted for the public. In Southeast Asia, it is available only in Singapore, Malaysia, and Philippines. Reader's Digest Indonesia was published by PT Sarana Media Internasional from 2004 until October 2015. In Malaysia, the magazine is distributed to schools that ordered in bulk orders at 33% discount. Free teacher copies and worksheets are available for beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels.

Reader's Digest magazine is colourful, and compact, making it easy for the students to bring it anywhere they go. There are a variety of articles under the health, technology and many other sections that would appeal to the secondary school students. The level of language use may be slightly higher for the students but challenging enough for them to improve their reading skills and vocabulary.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A study by Wan Zumusni, Norhayati and Wan Aida (2005) revealed that students' performance in English language learning improved using RD magazines and worksheets in the classrooms. The study was conducted in UiTM Kelantan, Malaysia and comprised 86 Diploma students, who were poor language learners from three faculties. The students were divided into two groups; 43 students in each control and experiential groups who used Reader's Digest magazines as supplementary materials in the classrooms for three months. Apart from increased motivation and positive attitudes towards reading outside the classrooms, students in the experimental groups reported to have increased their scores in the reading exam from 2.3% in the pre-test to 14% in post-test for those who scored 41-45 marks.

Magazines can be a valuable source of authentic materials since they include pictures and graphics and offer students a natural source of language use (Vavla, 2009). Reader's Digest magazines offer solutions to ESL educators to organize outdoor reading activities which are flexible, adaptable, cost and time-saving. Students must keep up with what is going around the world and having a current magazine that they can afford to buy would encourage reading beyond the classroom.

In addition, articles in newspapers and magazines offer current issues in various genres, making them excellent choices as they are easily available and inexpensive for university students (Al Nafisah and Al-Shorman, 2011). Secondary school students' motivation for reading would be highly influenced by teachers than family as found by Ulper (2011) that students' loyalty towards their primary and secondary school teachers correlates positively to their motivation to read. The use of authentic materials has improved school students' reading and speaking skills (Ardianti, 2024, and Ilahi et al, 2024).

An enrichment program within an exam-oriented environment has a positive impact on lecturers' and teachers' motivation and behaviour and appeals to different learning styles (Hussin, Maarof and D'Cruz, 2000 and Pyle, 2010). Teachers have also shown positive attitudes towards the use of authentic materials in ESL and EFL classrooms and this positively affects students' attitudes and motivation towards language learning (Polio, 2014, Lansford, 2014 & Akbari and Razavi, 2016). Authentic

materials motivate learners to communicate and prepare learners for real world communication (Lansford, 2014).

Kelly et al. (2002) and Polio (2014) offer effective ways for teachers to choose and use authentic materials with ESL/EFL students. This can be done by doing reading and writing activities outside the classroom involving teamwork and collaborative learning, in an outdoor setting. Outdoor learning has an influential and effective impact on students' academic performance on learning (Dhanapal, 2013) including students' enthusiasm for learning science. Therefore, organizing an outdoor activity using the magazine can also propagate the reading of Reader's Digest magazines beyond the four walls of ESL classrooms.

Despite a growing body of research emphasizing the benefits of authentic materials in enhancing ESL learning, significant gaps remain in the application of these materials in real-world contexts, particularly through collaborative initiatives like University Social Responsibility (USR) programs. While numerous studies (e.g., Hopper, 2005; Al-Nafisah & Al-Shorman, 2011) explore the use of authentic materials such as magazines and newspapers in classroom settings, there is limited research examining their impact when integrated into structured, outdoor learning activities that involve partnerships between universities and schools.

Moreover, previous literature often focuses on conventional learning environments and does not adequately explore innovative approaches to motivate ESL learners beyond the classroom (Dhanapal & Lim, 2013; Pyle, 2010). Studies by Lansford (2014) and Akbari & Razavi (2016) highlight the value of authentic materials for improving language skills but lack empirical evidence on how such materials can foster critical and creative thinking in less conventional, outdoor settings. Furthermore, while Kelly et al. (2002) and Polio (2014) suggest incorporating authentic materials into collaborative activities, they do not extend this approach to a holistic program that includes multiple stakeholders, such as teachers, lecturers, and students.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The case study involves a strategic collaboration with multiple industry and government partners. The USR program is designed by using a case study to conduct outdoor critical reading and creative writing activities on secondary school students to improve their motivation and learning behaviour in an ESL reading class. The study took place in a religious school in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. It involved 85 Form Four and Form Five students. The students spoke Malaysian language and/or local language other than English at home. They learned English as a second language as a subject at the schools. Some of them used English actively during school hours, and several used it for social media interactions.

This study bridges these gaps of previous studies by presenting a unique case study that integrates a USR program with secondary school education, leveraging Reader's Digest magazines as authentic materials for outdoor reading and writing activities. Unlike prior research on reading and authentic materials, this study:

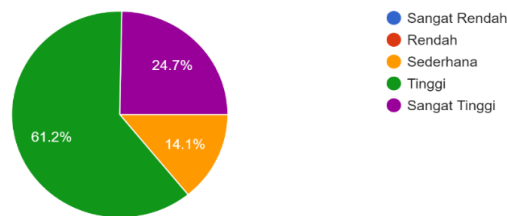
1. Expands the Context of Authentic Material Use: It moves beyond classroom-based applications to examine the impact of outdoor activities achieved through a university-school-industry-government collaboration. The program's design involves checkpoints for indoor and outdoor group tasks that stimulate critical and creative thinking, which is underexplored in existing literature.
2. Highlights the Role of USR Programs: While USR programs are often associated with community engagement in areas like sustainability or health, their application in language education is relatively novel. This study underscores the potential of USR initiatives to bridge institutional knowledge and community needs, addressing academic and social objectives.

3. Fills the Gap in Collaborative Approaches: By involving multiple stakeholders namely lecturers, schoolteachers, and industry partners, the study demonstrates how collaborative efforts can enhance the learning experience. This addresses the gap in research on stakeholder involvement in ESL education programs.
4. Provides Empirical Data on Outdoor Learning: The study contributes empirical evidence at a small scale, on the effectiveness of outdoor learning for improving ESL students' motivation, confidence, and skills, complementing theoretical discussions by Dhanapal (2013) and others.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

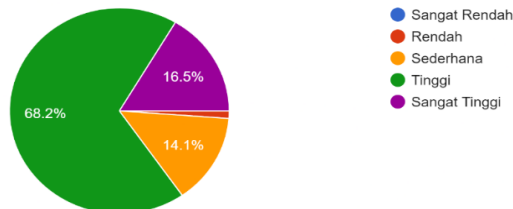
Indicators: Blue (Very low), Red (low), Orange (Moderate), Green (high) and purple (very high). The next pie chart indicates students' interest after the activity. The next pie chart indicates students' interest in reading in the English language and their confidence.

4. Minat anda terhadap aktiviti membaca bahan bacaan Bahasa Inggeris
85 responses



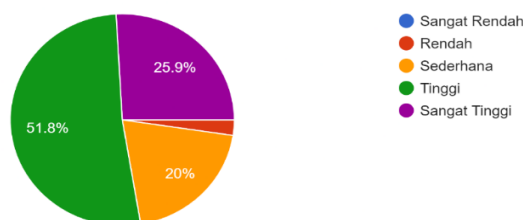
The next pie chart indicates students' confidence after the activity.

5. Keyakinan anda untuk membaca bahan bacaan Bahasa Inggeris
85 responses



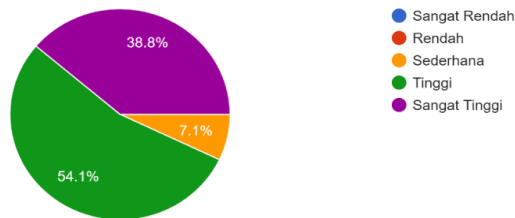
The next pie chart indicates students' understanding when reading English magazines after the activity.

6. Kefahaman anda apabila membaca bahan bacaan Bahasa Inggeris
85 responses



The next pie chart indicates students' belief that reading English language magazines can improve their vocabulary after the activity.

7. Kepercayaan anda terhadap aktiviti membaca bahan bacaan Bahasa Inggeris dapat membantu menambah pembendaharaan kata
85 responses



Pictures from Case Study



Photo 1: Reading activities using Reader's Digest magazines at one of the checkpoints.



Photo 2: Creative writing activity using Reader's Digest magazines at the school canteen.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the innovative aspects of using Reader's Digest in a USR program and the outdoor activity approach and the potential impact on ESL teaching strategies globally. The results of the pre- and post-experimental tests are promising. The USR program Reader's Digest magazine in and out of class successfully attracts secondary ESL students to read Reader's Digest magazines outside the

classrooms. It may increase their motivation to read together with friends and family members. This activity of reading critically and writing creatively outside of class can be carried out according to the level of both primary, secondary, and university students.

The success of developing CREW RD can be seen in the warm welcome given by the school students and the positive feedback from the school's English teachers. The school is also interested in subscribing to the magazine because, in addition to the discounted price offered, the school also gets free worksheets to use in or out of class.

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8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

All authors offered valuable feedback and contributed to shaping the research, analysis, and manuscript.

9. CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to ICGSPB.

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