

LITERATURE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: PERCEPTIONS, CHALLENGES AND PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

Malaysia's education policy is aligned to its vision, which aims to become a fully developed nation by 2020. Some of the measures taken to achieve this vision are introducing ICT through the Smart school program and improving the proficiency of English in Malaysia by introducing literature as part of the English syllabus. Teachers' attitudes and perceptions play a key role in making sure that any initiative introduced by the Ministry of Education is successful. This paper aims to find out teachers' perceptions on teaching literature in primary schools and the challenges or difficulties faced by them. It also aims to investigate teachers' knowledge of literature and literature teaching methodology. Data was gathered using questionnaire distributed to teachers in Kemaman selected through cluster sampling and analyzed using SPSS. Results showed that teachers' attitudes towards literature were moderately positive. Teachers faced a number of problems and their knowledge of literature is moderate. Teacher variables do not significantly relate to their perceptions, problems and knowledge.

Keywords: teaching literature, primary school, perceptions, challenges, knowledge, Malaysia

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education decided to introduce literature in primary schools after the success of implementing literature component at secondary level. Literature was reintroduced as part of the English syllabus in 2000, in line with Vision 2020 which is to become a fully developed country. Literature is viewed as a way to improve students' proficiency level in English and to produce holistic, balanced individuals who excel not only academically, but also spiritually and emotionally. The ultimate goal is to provide future workforce who can contribute positively towards achieving this aim of becoming a developed nation.

The Children's Contemporary Literature programme in primary schools was introduced in 2004. It involves students in Year 4, 5 and 6 with the aim of inculcating the reading habit, improving their reading skills, promoting cultural understanding, enhancing knowledge of English and expanding their vocabulary (Mohamed & Rosli Talif, 2007). Different titles are provided for national (SK) and vernacular schools (SJK). Students have to read three books every year. Teachers are encouraged to use a combination of teacher and child centred approaches where lessons are divided into three stages; pre-reading, while reading and post reading. Most importantly, unlike in secondary schools, the learning of literature for primary students is not assessed.

There are many factors which concern the stakeholders in introducing literature in primary schools. Teachers' lack of proficiency and confidence to teach English is viewed as the main problem in teaching literature in primary schools. In Terengganu for example, research shows that Bahasa Melayu or the local dialect is used up to 70% in weak classes and 30% in better classes by both Malay and non-Malay English teachers (Mohd Sofi, 2002). Whether a new programme is successfully executed in schools will depend mainly on the teachers. 'No matter how good the curriculum, infrastructure or teaching aids, at the end of the day it is the teachers who make a difference' (Noraini et al, 2007: 102). Currently in Malaysia, we have non-optionists teachers from various backgrounds who are 'coerced' into teaching English in schools because their subjects or options are not offered in the school or more commonly, there are not enough English teachers available. These reluctant teachers are not equipped to teach English, let alone literature.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Perceptions towards teaching literature

The announcement made by the Ministry of Education that literature will be taught in primary schools raised concerns among the public. The government was cautioned not to rush the implementation and to conduct a study before it is carried out (The Star May 2008). The sentiment is echoed by experts who consider that the government should instead improve the state of language teaching in Malaysia by addressing problems like teachers' proficiency level, reducing the number of non-optionist teachers and investigating the effectiveness of KPLI (Vethamani, 2008). Teachers also propose that the implementation is done gradually to ensure everyone involved has time for planning and preparation. Changing the mindset of the teachers and motivating them can pose real problems for the Ministry of Education and it is not confined to English teachers only but to others "who got into the teaching profession with low grades and little or no interest in education" (Mary Chandrapillai, 2007).

In an online forum conducted by MELTA (Malaysian English Language Teachers Association) on the issue, teachers give mixed reaction towards the suggestion. Those who agree think that there is no age limit in studying literature. Primary students can read literature as they are already reading short stories in English textbooks. Some suggest that students can read the abridged version of literary texts. Most teachers agree that it is vital to choose suitable, easy texts which students can relate to. Teachers who are against implementing literature in primary school think

students are too young to understand and appreciate literature. They also cite students' lack of proficiency in the language as one of the factors that need to be taken into consideration and recommend that the government wait until students' proficiency improves before implementing the move. They also question whether primary teachers are qualified to teach literature as many primary teachers are diploma holders

2.2 Challenges faced by teachers

When the Children's Contemporary Literature was introduced in primary schools in 2004, some schools only received four sets of fifteen books (Kow, 2007). Teachers who contacted the publisher were told that the books were not available and were asked to photocopy the books. This led some teachers to abandon the programme as they feel that reading these copies does not have the same impact as reading a real book. Furthermore, the programme is not included in their examination. Primary school teachers' proficiency and qualification is another challenge in introducing literature at primary level. A research conducted by Ganakumaran et al (2003) found that in secondary schools where there were 76.8% degree holders, only 68.0% of them received formal training in teaching literature. It can be speculated that less teachers in primary schools have learned literature or received training in teaching literature. Teachers who are not proficient and familiar with literature will end up reducing literary text to content which will not be engaging or fun for the students.

Students' proficiency in English is another obstacle in implementing literature in primary schools. Those with low ability will spend most of their time on lower level reading skills like trying to comprehend words and sentences which will distract them from understanding the bigger picture and making literature lessons very boring and painful. Teachers can also be reluctant to let the students use English as this takes more time in class (Mohd Sofi Ali, 2003). Other challenges are overburdening the students with yet another subject and the lack of time for students to study English as well as literature. There are other possible complications like the large number of students in each class, texts which are difficult, unsuitable topics and lack of cultural understanding among teachers and students.

2.3 Teachers' knowledge of literature and literature teaching methodology

Not much information is available on teachers' knowledge of literature, especially in Malaysian primary context. Aslam Khan (2003) conducted a study among teacher trainees who were being trained to teach literature in secondary schools under the Post-graduate Teaching Programme (KPLI) and found that most trainees are intimidated by literature which in turn, affects their confidence in teaching. However, after their KPLI training, they are more interested and confident to teach literature. Tina Abdullah et al (2007) found that teachers prepare themselves to teach literature mostly by watching movies, reading novels and short stories, reading criticism on literary texts and relating the text to their own background knowledge. They also found that experienced teachers showed less knowledge of literature compared to inexperienced teachers, probably due to the emphasis given on literature in the 1990s by training colleges and universities.

Good grasp of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and understanding students' interests and needs are some of the requirements needed to teach literature competently (Agee, 1998). Students favour teaching techniques that encourage them to respond personally, give their own opinion, and concentrate on the content of the text as opposed to analyzing details of language structure as well as having class discussions (Davis et al, 1992). Students enjoy imagining themselves as the characters, writing letters as one of the characters and retelling the story from others' point of view. Students indicate negative attitudes towards activities that require them to memorize facts, answered multiple-choice questions, read aloud, drilling and teacher-centred classes where interpretations are provided only by the teacher (Wan Kamariah, 2009).

The specific research questions of this study are:

1. What are the teachers' perceptions towards teaching literature in primary schools?
2. What are the problems faced by teachers in teaching literature?
3. What are the teachers' current knowledge of literature and literature teaching methodology?
4. Are the perceptions, challenges and knowledge related to their background variables such as gender, education level, options and teaching experience?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a survey method to answer the research questions. The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire which consists of two main sections. Section A of the instrument collects demographic information of the subjects such as gender, location of school, years of experience, age and education level. Section B of the instrument uses a seven-point Likert Scale to assess the teachers' perceptions, challenges and knowledge. A pilot study was conducted to establish questionnaire validity and reliability. Reliability was determined through the reliability coefficient, Cronbach alpha. The Cronbach alpha value for the instrument is 0.962. The population of this study comprised of 110 English primary school teachers from fifteen primary schools in Terengganu selected through cluster sampling. The teachers are from 35 schools located in Kemaman. The data collected from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS. Descriptive analysis of mean, frequency and percentage was conducted for all the items in the questionnaire. ANOVA, t-test and correlation analysis were carried out to determine if any of the teacher variables (years of experience, education level, school location and gender) influences teachers' perception and knowledge.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Perceptions

Most of the teachers involved in this study were female (82%) and were trained to teach English i.e. optionists (83.6%). About a third of the respondents are relatively new to teaching, with less than five years experience (36.4%). The majority of the respondents are degree (41.3%) and diploma holders (28.4%). 23 of the respondents are heads of panel while 2 are heads of department. Overall, teachers' perceptions towards teaching literature were moderately positive. Teachers seemed to believe that the component can inculcate reading habit among students (mean 4.91) and improve students' English (mean 4.84). They felt that they were able to cope with changes in the English syllabus (mean 4.8). In addition, they quite agree that introducing

literature in primary school was a good move (mean 4.75) and it contributes towards developing well-balanced individuals (mean 4.73). Teachers believe they have adequate language proficiency to teach literature (mode 5, mean 4.52). The contemporary texts are considered interesting and relevant (mean 4.47) and quite suitable for Malaysian students (mean 4.41). Teachers were neutral when asked if their students had adequate proficiency to learn literature (mean 4.01) and interestingly, none of the teachers strongly agree with the statement.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages for the items on teachers' perceptions towards literature in primary school

	Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly agree 7
It is a good move	7 (6.4%)	3 (2.7%)	9 (8.2%)	28 (25.5%)	23 (20.9%)	24 (21.8%)	16 (14.5%)
It can improve students' proficiency level	6 (5.5%)	3 (2.7%)	10 (9.1%)	23 (20.9%)	27 (24.5%)	24 (21.8%)	17 (15.5%)
It can inculcate reading habit	5 (4.6%)	7 (6.4%)	7 (6.4%)	18 (16.5%)	28 (25.8%)	25 (22.9%)	19 (17.4%)
It helps develop holistic, balanced students	5 (4.7%)	3 (2.8%)	5 (4.7%)	26 (24.3%)	38 (35.5%)	24 (22.4%)	6 (5.4%)
Texts have interesting topics and are relevant	1 (0.9%)	7 (6.4%)	14 (12.7%)	31 (28.2%)	35 (31.8%)	18 (16.4%)	4 (3.6)
Current texts used suit students' proficiency level	1 (0.9%)	6 (5.65)	16 (15%)	31 (29.4%)	34 (31.8%)	16 (15%)	3 (2.8%)
Current texts chosen have interesting, relevant topics	1 (0.9%)	7 (6.4%)	14 (12.7%)	31 (28.2%)	35 (31.8%)	18 (16.4%)	4 (3.6%)
I can cope with changes in the syllabus	1 (0.9%)	4 (3.6%)	11 (10%)	27 (24.5%)	34 (30.9%)	23 (20.9%)	10 (9.1%)
I am proficient enough to teach literature	3 (2.8%)	5 (4.6%)	14 (12.8%)	25 (22.9%)	40 (37.7%)	16 (14.7%)	7 (5.5%)
My students have adequate proficiency to learn literature	2 (1.9%)	6 (5.7%)	23 (21.9%)	42 (40%)	22 (21%)	10 (9.5%)	

Analysis using Anova and t-test showed that there was no significant difference between teachers' perceptions and their gender, whether they are English optionists or not and their positions as head of department or head of English panel. Their perceptions also did not differ according to their teaching experience or education level.

Table 2: Mean perception between optionists and non-optionists

Optionists/non-optionists	N	Mean
Yes	92	4.6025
No	18	4.6556
Total	110	4.6112

4.2 Challenges

Teachers seemed to be able to cope with the implementation of literature in primary schools. The main problem faced by teachers was the lack of time. Teachers indicated that they did not have enough time to teach literature (mean 3.9) or time to prepare for literature lessons (3.91). This is followed by the size of the classes which are too big (mean 4.0) and students' inadequate command of English (mean 4.01) as well as inadequate number of texts provided in schools (mean 4.08). These are common problems as mentioned by Karen Kow (2007) and Mohd Sofi (2003).

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages for the items on challenges faced by teachers

	Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly agree 7
I can cope with changes in the English syllabus	1 (0.9%)	4 (3.6%)	11 (10%)	27 (24.5%)	34 (30.9%)	23 (20.9%)	10 (9.1%)
I am proficient enough to teach literature	3 (2.8%)	5 (4.6%)	14 (12.8%)	25 (22.9%)	40 (36.7%)	16 (14.7%)	7 (5.5%)
Students have adequate proficiency to learn literature	2 (1.9%)	6 (5.7%)	23 (21.9%)	42 (40%)	22 (21%)	10 (9.5%)	
Number of texts provided are adequate	6 (5.6%)	5 (4.6%)	17 (15.7%)	41 (38%)	28 (25.9%)	7 (6.5%)	4 (3.7%)
Class size is not a problem	5 (4.5%)	9 (8.2%)	25 (22.7%)	30 (27.3%)	28 (25.5%)	9 (8.2%)	4 (3.6%)
Enough time to teach literature	7 (6.5%)	18 (16.7%)	18 (16.7%)	26 (24.1%)	22 (20.4%)	9 (8.3%)	8 (7.4%)
Enough time to prepare for literature lessons	7 (6.4%)	14 (12.7%)	19 (17.3%)	36 (32.7%)	18 (16.4%)	8 (7.3%)	8 (7.3%)
I can use books and the internet to help with my literature lessons	1 (0.9%)	10 (9.2%)	18 (16.5%)	26 (23.9%)	33 (30.3%)	15 (13.8%)	6 (5.5%)

4.3 Teachers' knowledge of literature

It seemed that teachers have the necessary, basic knowledge of literature. Teachers indicated that they can identify the main literary elements (mean 4.62) and they are also able to read and interpret poems (mean 4.62) and short stories (mean 4.51) independently. 49.1% of the respondents have learned literature compared to 23.6% who have never studied literature. Teachers indicated that they have adequate knowledge of literature (mode 5, mean 4.29). Although teachers generally showed that they have enough knowledge to teach literature, more training can be provided as the level is moderate, the mean ranging from 4.29 to 4.64.

Table 4: Frequencies and percentages for items on knowledge of literature

	Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly agree 7
I have learned literature before	5 (4.5%)	12 (10.9%)	9 (8.2%)	30 (27.3%)	30 (27.3%)	11 (10%)	13 (11.8%)
I have adequate knowledge of literature	4 (3.7%)	8 (7.4%)	19 (17.6%)	26 (24.1%)	31 (28.7%)	13 (12%)	7 (6.5%)
I can read and interpret poems chosen on my own	2 (1.8%)	5 (4.5%)	12 (10.9%)	37 (33.6%)	28 (25.5%)	22 (20%)	4 (3.6%)
I can read and interpret short stories chosen on my own.	3 (2.7%)	6 (5.5%)	9 (8.2%)	32 (29.1%)	30 (27.3%)	20 (18.2%)	10 (9.1%)
I can identify the main literary elements	4 (3.6%)	5 (4.5%)	12 (10.9%)	30 (27.3%)	26 (23.6%)	23 (20.9%)	10 (9.15)

4.4 Teachers' knowledge of literature teaching methodology

About 60% of the teachers indicated that they can use various approaches to teach literature (mode 5, mean 4.69). Teachers also have the ability to motivate and encourage students' interest (mode 5, mean 4.61). Teachers believed that they can use and adapt strategies to suit their students' proficiency level (mode 5, mean 4.51). However, respondents felt that they were not given enough supplementary materials as indicated by 37.2% of the teachers (mean 3.96). In addition, they also felt that they need to use Bahasa Malaysia or the students' mother tongue (mean 3.81) to teach literature. It implies that their students do not have adequate proficiency level to learn literature.

Table 5: Frequencies and percentages for items on knowledge of literature teaching methodology

	Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly agree 7
I can use various approaches to teach literature	2 (1.9%)	3 (2.8%)	17 (15.7%)	22 (20.4%)	32 (29.6%)	24 (22.4%)	8 (7.4%)
I can adapt strategies to suit my students' proficiency level	3 (2.7%)	5 (4.5%)	14 (12.7%)	27 (24.5%)	38 (34.5%)	18 (16.4%)	5 (4.5%)
I think teachers are given enough supplementary materials	4 (3.6%)	15 (13.6%)	22 (20%)	30 (27.3%)	23 (20.9%)	11 (10%)	5 (4.5%)
I can utilize ICT and internet for literature lessons	2 (1.8%)	9 (8.2%)	17 (15.5%)	28 (25.5%)	31 (28.2%)	17 (15.5%)	6 (5.5%)
I can motivate and encourage students' interest in literature	1 (0.9%)	5 (4.6%)	11 (10.1%)	30 (27.5%)	38 (34.9%)	19 (17.1%)	7 (6.4%)
I can teach literature without using BM or students' mother tongue	9 (8.2%)	14 (12.7%)	24 (21.8%)	27 (24.5%)	20 (18.2%)	10 (9.1%)	6 (5.5%)

T-test showed that there was no significant difference between optionist and non-optionist teachers' knowledge of literature and literature teaching methodology.

Table 6: Mean knowledge of literature and literature teaching methodology

	Mean knowledge of literature	Mean knowledge of literature teaching methodology
Optionists	4.54	4.30
Non-optionists	4.36	4.47

Analysis using ANOVA demonstrated that there is no relationship between teachers' knowledge of literature and literature teaching methodology and any of the background variables such as gender, teaching experience or education level or their position in the English panel.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Teachers play a big role in students' education. Not only do they impart knowledge to students but they also help shape students' attitudes towards education, school and more specifically, the subjects that they teach. Research shows that teachers' low motivation to implement an innovation stems partly due to the management which ignores teachers' perceptions (Habib, 2004). Therefore, it is vital that teachers are consulted and their opinions sought on any initiatives by the government. Appropriate measures need to be taken to reduce problems faced by teachers. For instance, supplementary teaching materials and hands-on training can be provided so that

teachers do not need to spend too much time preparing for literature lessons. Teachers can be taught how to produce their own supplementary materials. Instead of relying on the Ministry of Education or the reference books for materials, teachers can learn how to get information and sample lessons on the internet for example and adapt them to suit their students' proficiency level and interest

Teachers need to be trained how to read any text (not just those listed under the programme) independently and to be able to make their own interpretations of the texts by using critical thinking skills. Training can expose teachers to a variety of teaching strategies for literature which can be interesting and motivating for the students. For students with higher proficiency level for example, teachers can use activities where students get to practice their creative and critical thinking skills such as writing their own scripts, staging a drama or even creative writing. Teachers can encourage students to be more autonomous by using computers, internet and guiding them in activities like researching information on the author's background or the historical elements of the texts. It is vital to ensure that teachers are equipped with enough pedagogical and content knowledge through suitable in-service training as these influence classroom practices, which in turns affect students' learning outcomes and achievement (Fauziah, 2008).

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