

Students' Voices on Literacy Enhancement at a Tertiary Level

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ABSTRACT

The development of reading literacy at an early stage is a determining factor for students at the later stages. A review of studies that are related to this issue indicate that some students are still underperforming in reading English texts even at the tertiary level, hence they are unsuccessful to meet the expectancy of literacy skills needed to progress accordingly. This paper aims to investigate students' literacy skills and their perceptions towards the effectiveness of English for Social Science class in improving their reading literacy at the tertiary level. Adapting an interpretivism paradigm approach, the students' reading background prior to tertiary education was explored through a focus group interview. Ten undergraduates of non-English majors from the English for Social Sciences class were interviewed to elicit their attitudes and perspectives towards the course. The interview involved continuous questioning and comparisons were made on how these factors would cater to the needs of undergraduate students. The findings indicate students' negative perceptions towards the course as most of them had difficulties coping with academic reading at the tertiary level. This study highlights the need in providing suitable course content and academic support for the students to meet sufficient reading literacy level that they require. The findings suggest students' voices should be given some consideration when planning to improve the course contents and the mode of delivery of reading materials, especially for the tertiary level.

Keywords: *reading skills, literacy, low proficiency students, tertiary students*

Introduction

Reading literacy development at the earliest possible stage involves specific and important components such as reading fluency, phonological awareness, print knowledge, and oral language skills (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001). These components complement each other that will enable readers to read textual contents precisely and quickly and with an extent of expression that shows comprehension. For instance, phonological awareness is an imperative tool that refers to an individual's attentiveness to phonemes (sound) of a language (Burgess, 2002). This enables the reader to identify how a word in the text sounds and this is also complemented by oral language skills, a decoding mechanism that assists the reader to break down words to find textual meaning (Reeder & Baxa, 2017). When a reader with good phonological awareness and oral

language skills comes across a word in a text, they should be able to grasp the meaning of keywords and comprehend their relation to the context of the text, hence roughly gaining an overview of the text. Furthermore, with the aid of oral language skills in reading, the process would be more active when the learner comprehends the purpose of each word used and the syntactic arrangement of phrases in sentences to show passive or active notions of the text.

Moreover, reading is the initiation of the general literacy development process among language users, where reading will help the user to write, speak and listen to language components with appropriate efficiency. However, illiteracy in terms of reading English texts is worryingly common in Malaysia (Ratnawati & Ismail, 2003; Low, 2017). This traces back to the role of parents, school, and the environment that determines the overall process of developing reading literacy among learners. For instance, the extent of parental support is a crucial element for children at an early age to start the emergence of language learning in which, starts with reading. The socioeconomic factor is also a contributing factor to dictate the extent of the aforementioned support, apart from the educational background of the parents per se (Osman & Rajah, 2011). For instance, the balance of probability of sufficient support for reading development is more inclined towards those who have financial accessibility where the parents can afford numerous books and any other reading materials/platforms such as e-books and applications. This is further exerted by Suher et al. (2020) where sufficient reading assistance could help the students become more effective readers. Apart from that, the overall spectrum of environmental influences such as social factors also play a major part that affects the pathway of reading development among students. According to Sumathi (2021), the primary challenge found in rural areas in Malaysia is that English is not emphasized and highlighted in rural contexts due to the lack of the need to use the language. Overwhelmingly, the students who are affected by the aforementioned influences will not go through the ideal process of developing reading skills as well as interest and motivation of doing so (Al Darwish, 2016; Ahmad Zamri, 2017; Hamidah et al. 2017).

If these students go through years of schooling without having any interests and motivation in reading English texts, before entering the university, it would continue to affect the students negatively. As mentioned by Mauliya et al. (2020) most students with a lack of interest and motivation in learning resulted in poor academic performance whereby they would underperform in reading English texts, let alone academic texts. According to Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita (2012), students are expected to have a certain level of literacy skills before entering the next level of education. Thus, students with underdeveloped reading skills throughout their schooling years will continue to struggle with reading English texts, even in tertiary education, and the cycle would continue without proper apprehension. Such graduates would have reduced chances of getting employed, as there is a rising demand for English skills from employers. Good command of English, in general, is often sought after among employers especially in private sectors (Ting, Ernisa, Kee-Man, Jecky, & Collin, 2017). The role of the university is to provide apprehensive actions to mitigate the disparity of reading literacy among students to conform to the industry's needs and produce more marketable graduates that must be met. If not, illiteracy among students will put them at a disadvantage in the competitive, global arena of today and impede national growth as well (Halim, Zuria, & Safani, 2005; Low, 2017). According to Hazita (2016) in response to raising the proficiency among Malaysian students, a number of challenges are faced by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Government of Malaysia to prepare several

notable reforms spanning more than 30 years of English Language Education in the country. This was earlier pointed out by Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita (2012) where several challenges in students' literacy in the English language are prevalent among Malaysian students. The classroom that is not relevant to the current literacy needs and our educational environment puts heavy emphasis on evaluating students' performance and the ability to obtain good grades in the examination (Normazidah, Koo and Hazita, 2012) have affected students' proficiency in language, especially reading and writing skills. Hence, the current literacy of improving English proficiency in the Malaysian classroom is to have meaningful and emergent new literacy, new knowledge, and promoting continuity and discontinuity of literacy.

Apart from that, the use of English denies their sociocultural identities and this has made the students feel alienated and marginalized by their society. Thus, they prefer to use their language to make them feel a sense of conformity and acceptance in their respective environments (Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita, 2012). Having mentioned that, the list goes on to say the discouraging and uncondusive learning environments inhibit the school to practise critical and creative thinking skills, cross-cultural and diversity learning in nurturing reading habits and improving their language literacy remain a reality.

These challenges have always drawn disparity between urban and rural schools as socio-economic factors defeated the efficiency of teaching language. This is supported by Al Darwish (2016) who denoted that a family with a steady income would likely be a major influence towards their children's performance in school, in which they are provided with sufficient support in terms of financial aspects for a better learning experience. However, some factors contributed towards low and limited English language proficiency in preparing them into tertiary education (Normazidah, Koo and Hazita, 2012) such as the social surroundings which are influenced by unenthusiastic attitudes, lack of interest towards learning the language, and the discouraging environment to use the language. This is supported by Hamidah et al (2017) that attitudes in language learning is a crucial role in determining one's success, in which students with positive attitudes will have better motivation levels and be more successful compared to those with negative attitudes. The school seems to be the only place for contact and exposure to the English language. Thus, it is conceptualized that only through school experience rather than authentic and meaningful learning is the real use of the English language for some of these students. This naturally explains that the limited and low proficiency (Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita, 2012) makes students fear communicating in English as they lack vocabulary, are anxious, and demotivated.

The Study

The Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia offers English for Social Sciences, a course which is a prerequisite for students to partake in their studies regardless of their major in the degree. According to Guidelines Book of Faculty Social Sciences and Humanities Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for Undergraduates (2017), the objectives of the course are to assist the students to utilize the relevant academic reading skills and strategies in comprehending texts related to their disciplines. Moreover, the purpose of enrolling in the course is to enable the students to develop study skills and academic proficiency in the English language. The course adopts an integrated approach incorporating the macro skills of reading, speaking, and writing within the context of a particular academic area. Therefore, this course, Eng-

lish for Social Sciences or *Bahasa Ingggris untuk Sains Sosial* (BIUSS) is compulsory for the students who achieved Band 2 and below to improve their language literacy especially in reading at the tertiary level respective disciplines. Mamat (2016) supports that the low-level proficiency students who scored Band 2 and below based on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) have to register for the course in helping them to improve their reading at a tertiary level according to the faculty's guidelines. These students enrol only in one English course throughout their 3-year undergraduate programme. It is important to make this stand as the process of learning and improving literacy skills is long term and continuous rather than within a short period (Ratnawati & Ismail, 2003; Lee, 2008; Radzuwan et al, 2017). Additionally, at the tertiary level, reading and dissecting information from English academic journals are essential skills. Thus, these students need to focus on the essential language skills by providing a suitable academic curriculum and support for students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out from students, the effectiveness of the English for Social Sciences catering for reading literacy. Hence, this paper seeks to find out the proficiency in English among Social Science students before joining an undergraduate programme and how the English course offered to these Social Science students prepares them at the tertiary level.

Methodology

Using the qualitative approach, the researchers gathered respondents' proficiency level prior to entering the tertiary level and their opinions about the effectiveness of the English for Social Sciences course in the process of enhancing their literacy. The approach enabled the researchers to describe the respondent's perspective, views, and feelings (Zikmund et al, 2013). According to Akbayrak (2000), the qualitative method improves an in-depth interpretation of the subject being studied. The perspectives of the respondents will thus be categorised and, analysed thematically to be reported.

The respondents comprised of 10 undergraduates in different semesters of their study, they are all non-English majors and had registered for the course. There is no regulation on how many participants are considered sufficient to retrieve data in qualitative research. As stated by Cohen et al. (2011), there is no clear rule in determining the number of samples in qualitative research since it relies on the fitness towards the purpose of the study. Hence for this study, the researchers find it sufficient to have 10 respondents to collect the data.

Data were collected via face-to-face interviews. This was deemed a suitable method of data collection because it was highly flexible where the researcher could add the nature of the open-ended questions and the process of questioning to elicit more information from the interviewees. The interview questions were bilingual (English and Malay language) to ensure that the participants clearly understood the context of the questions. A set of semi-structured interview questions was done to seek out the students' proficiency level before entering the tertiary level and their perceptions about the effectiveness of the English for Social Sciences course in the process of enhancing their literacy. There were three sections in the interview questionnaire. The questions in the first section were sought to obtain general information and the demographic background of the respondents. The questions in the second section were designed to elicit information on their level of language proficiency from their background stories and experiences. As for the third section, it

was to obtain the information of the students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the English for Social Sciences class.

To capture the perspective of the respondents, the primary data were collected using the face-to-face interview to elucidate the subjective experience of students on the effectiveness of English for Social Sciences class. The interview was also recorded to ensure that all the information from the interview would be transcribed into written data. Then, the researchers coded the 10 respondents using the alphabet A to K, this is to help the researchers to capture and extract out the data from each respondent systematically. Moreover, the researchers have also categorised the data into two parts. Firstly, they analysed the transcribed data by looking into the factors that contributed directly or indirectly to the students' language proficiency and how these factors would accommodate English for Social Science class in catering for their needs as undergraduate students. The researchers paid meticulous consideration to the respondents' experiences at both the micro and macro levels. Secondly, the researchers examined how such contextual conditions interact with their practices and experiences related to their perceptions and attitudes towards English for Social Science class. The results from the data were discussed thoroughly with reference to past studies.

Findings And Discussion

This section presents the research findings of the study.

Factors Affecting Students' Reading Proficiency

Based on the data collected from the interview, several prominent factors were shared among the respondents, whether at home or school prior to entering tertiary education that determined their present reading proficiency. Three factors dictated their course of developing English proficiency and thus, defining their existing literacy level. External factors such as family and socioeconomic factors as well as internal that primarily consist of individual aspects were identified as the main components in their early reading development.

Factor 1: Family Background

From the students' experiences, it was clear that family education background significantly influenced their experiences and proficiency in English literacy. Three out of the ten students mentioned that their family provided them with a favourable English learning environment. As mentioned by Hamidah et al (2017), family plays a major role in language learning as the fundamental framework of personality and development are established at home. They are more or less inspired by their parents or other family members. They all believe that these core factors have positive impacts on reading and writing the English language. This shows that families or parents that provide a supportive environment in language learning, positively impact their children's English language literacy development

According to Student I:

“Yes, since my parents do speak English mostly at home.”

Student G also stated:

“Well, actually we have the mother tongue but I do speak a lot of English with family members at home and friends who grew up with me. And I come from the convent school that provided me with a good English language environment.”

Factor 2: Socioeconomic Status

The findings further explained when asked about their socioeconomic status; a student stated that her friends and the social environment also did not help much, since she lives in a remote area in Terengganu. The parents did not encourage her extensively in terms of reading English books at home when she was young. But they did reassure her to read books in Malay, but not English in particular. This has been an external factor for most non-English major as they can only read Malay because of their family background, thus reading materials for the English language was only used in schools. This reason also brings to a point where buying books was an expensive affair. Hence, the socioeconomic status of students can influence the students' reading development in English because of their lack of access to English reading materials. Moreover, a student also mentioned that she wanted to enrol in an English tuition class but could not do so as her single mother was the only provider for her family. She felt that it might burden her mother as she has three younger siblings who are in schools which would require her mother's support as well. This reason further stresses that social-economic factors do shape students' early literacy development. This is supported by Thomson (2018) that the relationship between socioeconomic and language performance is direct and in which the factors such as financial readiness and ability to supply learning resources will both, directly and indirectly, cause hindrances on language development and performance at a later stage.

Factor 3: Students' Motivation

Moreover, students' motivation and obligations also impacted their English proficiency.

According to Student C:

“It depends on my major because most of my class does not use English language as a medium.”

Therefore, it can be seen that the students' major or discipline played a role in motivating them to use and read English only in the classroom as an act of obligation as well as a requirement for them to pass. Howev-

er, a good role model can also influence the students as they are continuously being inspired to use the language and overall develop their reading habits.

Student I shared:

“..since my mother is an English teacher, I kind of got inspired by her, and reading English books is one of the reasons for me.”

Thus, a personal factor can inspire these individuals to be a proficient reader.

Students’ Reaction towards English for Social Sciences

Based on the identified factors that determined their existing proficiency, particularly in reading English texts, the same participants were asked of their perceptions and on the English for Social Sciences on catering further literacy needs among students. Their reaction resulted in three major results which are positive reaction in teaching and learning pedagogy, negative reaction in teaching and learning pedagogy, and the issues on BIUSS course content. The results are tabulated into the students reading experience Table 1 shown below:

Table 1: Students’ Reading Experience in BIUSS

Students’ Reading Experience	Reaction
Positive reaction in teaching and learning BIUSS	Student A: <i>“The class helped to learn vocabularies to be added to my list of known words. That helps a bit in terms of reading, but not so much in terms of English academic texts because the nature of the texts that comprise of jargons and advanced words.”</i>
	Student B: <i>“BIUSS is a good class for those who scored low bands in MUET. It taught me how to read with the right pronunciation and learn new vocabularies.”</i>
	Student C: <i>“The environment in that class is pretty relaxed and a lot of fun involved.”</i>

	<p>Student D: <i>“BIUSS is an interesting class but in my opinion, the students also should participate more in class to make it even better.”</i></p>
<p>Negative reaction in teaching and learning BIUSS</p>	<p>Student E: <i>“Being passive during the lesson does not add to the collaborative efforts of learning how to use the language. (Yet) It also exposes me to reading English texts in which reading out loud helps me with my pronunciation.”</i></p>
	<p>Student E: <i>..but in terms of helping me reading an English text i.e., academic journal? Not really. No reading strategies were taught in that class, I just read it again and again without clear understanding</i></p>
	<p>Student F: <i>“For me, BIUSS is not a necessary course because the level of difficulties is too easy for me. Honestly, the needed skill for reading academic texts which is harder is not exposed even for a bit. That is the skills that I lack, and the materials do not compliment that.”</i></p>
	<p>Student G: <i>“I think it should be emphasized more on university level students in terms of reading and writing.”</i></p>
	<p>Student H: <i>“I find the class quite funny that the lecturers should teach us English at tertiary level, but what we get was basic English focusing on pronunciation all the time.”</i></p>
<p>Student I: <i>“At first, I thought this class could help me enhance my English at a tertiary level...because from what I know, entering Uni would require us to do a lot of academic</i></p>	

	<p><i>reading, writing and of course academic presentation...that's what I thought, but what we learn is basic English like we learn in schools. I don't know for the rest, but it was kind of easy for me."</i></p>
<p>Issues on BIUSS Course Content</p>	<p>Student J: <i>"This class makes me question if there really is a variety of English out there because it (the class) really focuses on pronunciation and there are few times where we had heated moment with the lecturer because we pronounce it differently than a native speaker."</i></p>
	<p>Student G: <i>"That is the (reading academic journals) skills that I lack, and the materials do not compliment that."</i></p>
	<p>Student E felt that: <i>"...the class is very basic and unnecessary. Rather than progress, I regressed from that class due to the confusion of what I am lacking. The content is too brief and simple, not much emphasis on the current stage of English level in tertiary education. I need to know on how to gain an overview of the text in an in-depth manner, not just the surface levels."</i></p>
	<p>Student H: <i>"The text given in class was generally for reading out loud session and we did have discussion about it but I was hoping for a text that could fit more into a tertiary level? Because the discussion we had was very brief."</i></p>
<p>Student I: <i>"The texts were very easy and simple that didn't require us to analyse it in depth. Probably because the class don't really focus on</i></p>	

reading skills but just on reading the text. Though I was hoping we could implement the skills into reading as it would be beneficial for us tertiary students.

Student J:

“For my class, we would normally be given short texts to read, but none of the texts was how I expected a tertiary level of English text would be...you know, academic journal and what not. Because on final year we would have to write our Latihan Ilmiah (Academic Exercise) and I was hoping that this class could help me develop my academic writing and reading skills.

Five of the ten participants gave a positive reaction towards the teaching method such as reading out loud helps the students to gain interest and confidence in the class. Hence, the class is helpful for the students to understand and improve their basic language skills which were missed out at the school level, especially their reading skills. Students can expand their vocabularies which helps them to understand the reading materials. This shows that phonological awareness is an imperative tool that enables the reader to identify how a word in the text sounds and functions as a decoding mechanism that assists the reader to break down words to find textual meaning (Burgess, 2002; Reeder & Baxa, 2017). On the other hand, negative reactions due to the lack of a positive and dynamic atmosphere for English class is a great concern among the students. The participants were aware of the constraints of the BIUSS class that could limit their learning. Six out of ten participants demonstrated that the English class offered by the faculty has impeded their reading experiences and hampered their language proficiency as the class was not streamed by students' proficiency level. Furthermore, the participants have expressed the issues on the BIUSS course content which could affect their ability in academic reading on a tertiary level. Six out of ten participants agreed on teaching materials used in English class did not cater to the students' needs in improving their reading literacy as undergraduates. The students felt the reading texts in the course were good but they did not help in learning how to improve literacy skills like reading and writing. According to Koo (2008) and Zuhana et al (2014), students' lack of training on how to read and think critically in class resulted in their poor ability to engage with a text analytically and to read critically. For academic reading, students should be able to dissect the information in the text and to engage efficiently in complex inferential skills. Hence, it is crucial to teach students the specific reading strategies for a tertiary level which would involve a lot more academic texts like journal articles and related to their field of study.

The faculty's move in providing English for Social Sciences course for the students did help them to understand and improve their basic language skills as the class piqued the students' interest in learning the language skills actively. However, the findings of the study provide the information that *BIUSS* class facilitates the students in improving their English language learning but not specifically for their reading development as it does not sufficiently prepare them for academic reading at the tertiary level. The teaching materials used in *BIUSS* class are not catered to the students' needs in improving their reading literacy as university students. This has serious implications for the students since they are expected to be able to read and think critically at the tertiary level. Moreover, the findings also show that *BIUSS* class lacks a positive and dynamic atmosphere for an English class which could limit the students learning development. English class course outline plays a critical role in helping students to develop their language skills and see connections between what they are currently learning and what they have learned before but *BIUSS* class needs to improve their course outline as the class is not sorted accordingly to students' proficiency level.

Conclusion

On the whole, the findings showed an array of mixed perceptions among the participants in regards to *BIUSS* class in terms of its overall effectiveness, involved teaching methods, teaching materials as well as the consistency of the class per se. In general, the balance of the two kinds of perceptions is more inclined towards the negative aspects of the class and not as helpful as anticipated in catering sufficient reading literacy that suits the students' needs. The findings indicate students' negative perceptions towards *BIUSS* class as most of them are having difficulties coping with academic reading, especially at the tertiary level. This study highlights the need of the faculty in providing suitable course content and academic support for the students in catering sufficient reading literacy to suit the students' needs that contribute to academic success at the graduate level.

There are a few recommendations put forward based on the findings of the study. First, English classes offered by the faculty should be offered for at least four semesters. This can be proved from the findings that the students, especially for non-English majors, are only required to take the class till their second year. Hence, the use of English language is not only a pass requirement but preparing them to be marketable for their resume in the future. Moreover, the teaching and reading materials should meet the requirement for academic and employment purposes. The faculty should not underestimate students' capability in wanting to improve their reading literacy. Hence, a consistent effort from the English class and students themselves can affect tremendously their reading skills as undergraduates. Likewise, the teaching methods should cultivate critical skills in enhancing their cognitive skills. Apart from that, students should be sorted out according to proficiency level in catering to their needs based on the curriculum that is suited for their level. Therefore, demotivation can be avoided when the language class can be productive in improving their language literacy according to students' proficiency.

To conclude, the study on students' perceptions towards *BIUSS* class among undergraduates in catering for their literacy needs and improving their proficiency has set stepping stones for other researchers to look on other English courses offered at other faculties or other institutions of higher learning where students can

improve their reading literacy and language proficiency. This will be a worthy step in ensuring that these undergraduates can be on par with other local and international universities. Hence, research with more respondents can be carried out to investigate the effectiveness of English courses that cater for undergraduates to improve and sustain students' proficiency. This will help the department concerned and the students to prepare and cultivate English proficiency with a focus on reading, and at the same time prepare them for future employment. A smart learning environment cannot be enriched without acquiring an interest in English. Thus, it is crucial at this time to improve their language skills and be motivated to go the extra mile to enhance their literacy level. From the findings of the study, the students' perceptions help the faculty to cater to the students' proficiency among Social Science students before joining an undergraduate program and how the English course offered to these students would help them to prepare and improve their literacy skills at the tertiary level. This is especially desired in the internet world where students have to be literate in English Language as it is also a platform for career opportunities in Malaysia and globally.

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