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INSIGHT JOURNAL
UiTM CAWANGAN JOHOR

INSIGHT JOURNAL
UiTM Cawangan Johor
Online Journal

Vol. 1, No. 1: 2018



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Enhancing comprehension with e-reading materials

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of e-reading materials for motivating and enhancing reading comprehension among ESL learners. It is part of an ongoing research which experiments with the use of one-sentence short stories in an animated form for cultivating ESL reading habits. The sample comprises 26 respondents majoring in various diploma-level courses in a Malaysian higher learning institution. A reading comprehension test was administered to identify the learners' reading comprehension level according to the Blooms' taxonomy framework. A survey was then conducted to collect data on their perceptions of the e-reading materials. Data from both instruments was analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings of the study indicate that the ESL learners performed significantly well in both lower and higher order thinking skills as a result of using the animated short stories. They also had positive outlook toward the e-reading materials and the use of group discussions for enhancing their comprehension level.

Keywords: ESL learners, e-reading materials, reading comprehension, Blooms' Taxonomy framework.

1. Introduction

Finding good reading materials in bookshops is a task that avid book readers perform, spending time and effort browsing through shelves after shelves of books. With the boom of technology, books are now available in electronic websites like amazon.com. In effect, this has led to books being made available online for reading. E-reading materials are gradually becoming viable as more and more readers access them through their smartphones and computers. This poses an opportunity that should not be missed by educational institutions to enhance learning and learners' comprehension with the immense possibilities provided by digital technology.

In recent times, a lot of emphasis has been given to the use of technology in the ESL reading classroom. In the Malaysia Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025, one of the 11 shifts for transformation of the education system is the leverage of ICT to scale up quality learning across Malaysia (MEB 2013-2015, September 2012). This shows the government's sensitivity towards global trends in teaching and learning to shape Malaysian students for 21st century education. A lot of research has also been focused on reading and literacy among Malaysian students. In its aspiration to become a developed nation, conscientious efforts have been made to improve literacy so that it can achieve a rate of 100% by the year 2020. The World Education Report (1993, as cited by Inderjit, 2014) rated Malaysia with a literacy rate of 78.4% and this is one of the lowest compared to other Southeast Asian countries (Singapore 100%, Indonesia 81.6%, Thailand 93% and Philippines 89.7%). Improvement of literacy can only be possible if cultivating reading skills, which is closely related to literacy, is taken seriously.

Gough et al. (1996, as cited in Ibrahim et al., 2007) states that learning to read involves both the acquisition of word reading and reading comprehension skills. It is a cognitive process of letter knowledge, phonological awareness, auditory or visual perceptions, working memory and vocabulary recognition. Reading comprehension on the other hand is heavily influenced by reading fluency. Reading comprehension is a skill that is critical in the educational success of learners. Learners will struggle in other subject areas when they are unable to comprehend what they have read (Baier, 2005). This goes to show that reading is fundamental for learners to be able to tap onto knowledge and new information in order for cognitive processes to function hence, promoting better understanding and communication.

Further, it is important to note that while reading and literacy are intricately related, the fact that the world is fast evolving towards a digitally web based environment for learning is undeniable. E-reading is already trending around the globe and is fast becoming a daily necessity for information and research. In keeping with this pace then, it is only reasonable to provide for such necessity by making technology enhanced materials available for the e-reader. Young learners especially those categorized in the generation Y category are among today's avid users of web based technology. Conventional reading materials in print and paper are less appealing

compared to the ever available wealth of knowledge that these learners find with a click and a swipe of their electronic devices.

In view of this, the present study attempts to identify learners' motivation in the use of technology for reading environments which causes some learners to have low reading comprehension and other learners to have high reading comprehension in reading English texts. The main concerns are whether (1) the use of technology-enhanced materials improves reading comprehension skills and (2) the technique of short texts and activities provide motivation for reading.

This section has given an overview of the study by presenting its background and purposes. The next section of the paper will consider the review of literature from past research that is related to the present study.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The Importance of Reading

Reading is defined as a process or mode of thinking that involves complex real experience skills such as the ability to perceive printed words, to skim for information and to read intensively (Inderjit, 2014). Reading is not a natural innate skill but a cultural activity (Wolf, 2008). Through reading, new ideas and knowledge are acquired, needed information are obtained and command for language and vocabulary are improved. It is an activity that can be used for pleasure to relax the mind. It is also a fundamental activity for education. In education, reading is very important for students to acquire information, general knowledge and for brushing up their writing abilities (Silver-Pacuilla and Ruedel, 2004). Kirsch and Guthrie (1984) found that reading for adults contribute to their job success, career development and ability to respond to change and without it the chances for academic and occupational success are limited (Silver-Pacuilla and Ruedel, 2004). With the amount of online information available on the web, peoples' behaviour towards reading has changed.

While Malaysia has seen a paradigm change in its education system, pushing the boundaries of learning towards a better educated nation with a zero percent illiteracy rate by the year 2020 has yet to become a reality as Malaysia still lag behind other South East Asian countries in terms of literacy (Inderjit, 2014). This is because this country's reading habit has not developed as it should. The repercussions are that Malaysians are said to lag in their reading habits.

2.2 The Education System in Malaysia

In Malaysian schools, Bahasa Melayu is the first language, while English is the second or third language learned by school children. Majority of these children find reading English text difficult

and as a result they are considered literate in Bahasa Melayu while illiterate in English (Ibrahim et. al 2007). Based on the aspirations to become an industrialized nation by the year 2020, Malaysia has made many conscious efforts to improve and develop literacy so that it will achieve 100% literacy. According to Inderjit (2014) reading is an aspect associated with literacy and the reading process is not simple in its nature. Previous research has also proven that Malaysian adults are poor readers while school children only read when they are preparing for their examination. In Malaysia and other parts of the world, internet usage will be part of the bandwagon in increasing the number of virtual readers. As a result, the number of students who read printed materials will decrease significantly (Inderjit, 2014).

2.3 The Use of Technology in Teaching and Learning

According to Cardullo et al. (2012), current research is redefining reading comprehension in a digital environment and the comprehension strategies for online reading comprehension are emerging. Combining computer-based technologies with sound principles of literacy instruction in ways that complement each other can help students develop the skills and confidence they need to be successful readers and achieve highest achievement. In addition, computer learning environment can offer learning experiences that motivate students, provides a context for the learner that is challenging and stimulates curiosity, provide highly individualized instruction, promote positive attitudes toward learning, facilitate cooperative, collaborative and positive social behaviour, provide learner-controlled instruction and provide active learning experiences (Silver-Pacuilla and Ruedel, 2004). Digital reading materials were found to have facilitating effects on ESL learners' reading comprehension and concentration (Shahnil & Zaliffah, 2014). Because they are the 'digital natives', they find technology-enhanced reading materials changing and enhancing their reading habits.

In this section, past research related to the present study has been discussed. This would enable the researchers to have a wider view of the studies conducted in this area of research. The following section will focus on the present study and the method used to conduct the research which includes the respondents, instruments and procedure for analysis.

3. Method

This study examined the efficacy of using e-reading materials to enhance comprehension skills and motivation for reading among ESL learners. The study was conducted using quantitative method of which the diploma students from various courses at UiTM Cawangan Johor were divided into control and experimental groups. Data collected was then analysed based on descriptive statistics.

4. Respondents

There were 30 respondents selected using the convenient non-random sampling method as they were all part of the participants of a workshop. However, only 26 of the responses were deemed viable for the research. The respondents were all registered diploma students from various courses at the university which included Business Studies, Information Management, Investment Studies and Computer Science Studies. They made up of both male and female Malay students who were in the final year of their diploma studies. They were all attendance of the finishing school workshop organised by the counselling unit at the university.

5. Instruments

There were three main instruments used in the study. This included the e-reading material, the reading comprehension test and a questionnaire.

5.1 The e-reading material (PAVOFS Short Stories)

The e-reading material in this study is known as PAVOFS short stories which consist of five one-sentence long short stories. The purpose of the stories being one sentence long is to encourage learners to use complex sentences. Most learners are able to construct simple short sentences. However, constructing complex sentences can be challenging. Thus, PAVOFS short stories will introduce long complex sentences in a fun and innovative manner to encourage reading comprehension. Since the stories were only one sentence each, there were a total of five carefully selected stories that were selected for the research. The stories were original stories used for the research with the consent of the authors of the stories.

5.2 The Reading Comprehension Test

The reading comprehension test was adapted from the basic thinking skills listed in Bloom's Taxonomy. The test consisted of six questions which represented the six levels of comprehension which included the following:

LEVELS	1	2	3	4	5	6
SKILLS	Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
	Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS)				Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)	

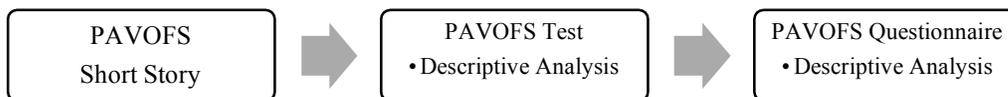
5.3 PAVOFS Questionnaire

The respondents were asked to complete the PAVOFS Questionnaire which has two parts;

- Part A - Background information (3 items)
- Part B – Perceptions on the short stories (10 items)

6. Procedure

In order to carry out the research, a set of 5 short stories that are made up of one sentence each were given to the respondents in the form of e-reading materials. They were required to read the PAVOFS stories and then to do the PAVOFS test which consisted of 6 questions based on the 6 levels of Blooms Taxonomy. After that, a survey was conducted by means of a set of questionnaires. Data was then tabulated and analysed using the descriptive analysis method as shown below.



7. Results and Discussion

7.1 Profiles of the Respondents

Below in Table 1 is the profile of the respondents concerning their gender, age and their major courses in the university. The 26 respondents consist of 23 females and 3 males. 76.9% of them are aged 18 to 21 years old while the remaining 6 are 21 to 23 years of age. Majority of the respondents are Computer Science (23.1%), Accountancy (19.2%) and Investment Analysis (19.2%) students. The remaining percentages were made up of Information Management (11.5%), Banking (7.7%) and Mathematical Science (3.8%) students.

Table 1: Profile of the respondents (n=26)

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	3	11.5
Female	23	88.5
<i>Age</i>		
18 – 20 years old	20	76.9
21 – 23 years old	6	23.1
<i>Major</i>		
Accountancy	5	19.2
Business Studies	4	15.4
Banking	2	7.7
Investment Analysis	5	19.2
Computer Science	6	23.1
Mathematical Science	1	3.8
Information Management	3	11.5

7.2 PAVOFS Test

Table 2 and Table 3 present the data on the respondents' performance in lower (LOTS) and higher order thinking skills (HOTS) based on the 5 short stories assigned to them. In Table 2, it can be seen that respondents performed better at the lower order thinking level ($M = .891$, $SD = .244$) compared to the higher order thinking skills ($M = .819$, $SD = .349$). Overall, the highest mean score was recorded for the first level of thinking which is Knowledge ($M = .904$) while the lowest mean score was recorded for one of the higher order thinking skills which is Synthesis ($M = .790$).

Table 2: Performance according to level of comprehension (n=26)

Level of thinking skills	M	SD
LOTS (M= .891, SD= .244)		
Knowledge	.904	.164
Comprehension	.894	.263
Application	.874	.305
HOTS (M= .819, SD= .349)		
Analysis	.848	.317
Synthesis	.790	.392
Evaluation	.818	.337

LOTS: Lower order thinking skills; HOTS: Higher order thinking skills

Below in Table 2 is the breakdown of each level of thinking skills according to the short stories assigned to the respondents. It can be seen that the students' performance varied from one short story to another, especially for stories 4 and 5. The lower mean scores may be the result of the types of stories given; stories 4 and 5 were set in a different cultural setting that may affect the students' content knowledge.

Table 3: Performance on comprehension level according to stories

Score Level	Story 1		Story 2		Story 3		Story 4		Story 5	
	M	SD								
LOTS										
Knowledge	1.00	.000	0.95	.000	1.00	.000	0.86	.359	0.71	.463
Comprehension	0.95	.218	0.90	.301	1.00	.000	0.86	.359	0.76	.436
Application	0.95	.218	0.95	.218	0.95	.218	0.76	.436	0.76	.436
HOTS										
Analysis	1.00	.000	0.86	.359	0.86	.359	0.71	.463	0.81	.402
Synthesis	0.95	.218	0.86	.359	0.76	.436	0.71	.463	0.67	.483
Evaluation	1.00	.000	0.86	.359	0.81	.402	0.71	.463	0.71	.463

LOTS: Lower order thinking skills; HOTS: Higher order thinking skills

7.3 PAVOFS Questionnaire

To examine the learners' perceptions of the e-reading materials, the respondents were asked about their opinions on the short stories used in the PAVOFS activity. Overall, a large majority of the students agree or strongly agree on the use of the stories which they found to be interesting and creative. More than half of the respondents strongly agree that the stories are short (53.8%) and easy to understand (53.8%). Half of the respondents (50%) also strongly favour the stories as they managed to complete all the stories and find that the stories help them to focus. They also found the vocabularies used in the stories easy to understand. At the same time, majority of the respondents agree that reading the stories help them think (53.8%) and improve their

English (57.7%). Lastly, 57.7% of them strongly agree that they would recommend the stories to others which further indicate their preference towards the stories.

Table 4: Perceptions on PAVOFS short stories (n=26)

No.	Item	1	2	3	4	5
1.	The stories are interesting.	0.0	0.0	3.8	57.7	38.5
2.	The stories are short.	0.0	0.0	3.8	42.3	53.8
3.	I understand the story.	0.0	0.0	3.8	38.5	53.8
4.	Vocabularies are easy to understand.	0.0	0.0	3.8	46.2	50.0
5.	The stories help me to think.	0.0	0.0	3.8	53.8	42.3
6.	The stories improve my English.	0.0	0.0	0.0	57.7	42.3
7.	The stories are creative.	0.0	0.0	0.0	34.6	65.4
8.	I completed reading all the stories.	0.0	0.0	3.8	46.2	50.0
9.	The stories help me learn to focus.	0.0	0.0	7.7	42.3	50.0
10.	I would recommend the stories to others.	0.0	0.0	3.8	38.5	57.7

1-Strongly Disagree 2-Disagree 3-Uncecided 4-Agree 5-Strongly Agree

8. Conclusion and recommendations

This study sought to investigate the use of technology-enhanced ESL reading materials to improve and motivate reading comprehension among ESL undergraduates. It is part of an ongoing study that examines the efficacy of using the e-reading material (PAVOFS) among ESL learners. Based on data collected, it was found that the 26 participants in this study performed significantly well in both lower ($M = .891$, $SD = .244$) and higher-order ($M = .819$, $SD = .349$) reading comprehension skills that was measured using Bloom's taxonomy. By only watching videos of the short stories, the students were able to complete the questions given in a reading comprehension test. When asked about the stories, the participants' responses showed their motivation towards reading the short stories that were presented in audio-visual form. Such preference for technology-enhanced reading materials among Malaysian ESL learners has also been documented in Shahnail and Zaliffah (2014). Thus, PAVOFS as a technology-enhanced reading material has a great potential in motivating and improving ESL learners' reading comprehension skills among Malaysian undergraduates.

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