

# **LITERACY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE INCORPORATION OF LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

Literacy is a major concern among educators in the Malaysian education scenario. Various programmes have been identified and implemented in primary and secondary schools to raise the standard of the English language among students. Among them is the implementation of various English language reading programmes. This move has been seen as necessary as part of the Malaysian government's efforts to make all Malaysians proficient in the English language. To this end, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has incorporated literature into the English language subject. Despite the concerted efforts from the various sections of the Ministry of Educations, the effectiveness of these programmes has been unclear. This study looks into the various programmes implemented in the Malaysian primary and secondary schools. Using a questionnaire, the study attempts to identify students' perception on the types of literary genre they enjoy reading. The study also looks into the various activities carried out by English teachers and students' views on the types of activities they enjoy and found useful in the classroom.

**Keywords:** English as a second language, literacy, literature, reading programmes, literary genre.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the new global era, literature has become a central issue on its' role in enhancing literacy among learners. Many have postulated the importance and significance of literature in improving learners' proficiency in the English language. For example, studies by Bleich (1975) and Knickerbocker (2002) have significantly shown the contribution of literature in improving learners' reading skills where else Wells (1986) emphasizes society and culture as pertinent elements in literacy interaction. Since literature involves the exploration of the lives of particular society and the culture surrounding them, it is apt to use literature to bridge the gap in literacy among students. This can be materialized through the use of literary works that explore particular society and culture. With much consideration, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) has taken drastic measures in introducing literature as a tool to enhance literacy among Malaysian students. This move comes into effect due to the declining standard of English among the new generation. The English language is often seen as a distracter which does not contribute directly towards students' future (Vethamani, 2004). Among the reasons are English is not made a compulsory subject to pass, hence the need and motivation to study the subject is lacking. On the other hand, with drastic changes that are taking place in the new global era, the MOE emphasizes the importance of competence in the English language among students since it is viewed as a 'survival skill' (Hishammuddin, 2004). As a survival skill, English language is needed for a nation to compete in the international market and to face numerous challenges in the globalized world. Furthermore, proficiency in the English language is very much needed for individual growth and development and for the growth of the nation as well. Therefore, literature is seen to be the best vehicle for the teaching of the English language among students.

Literature is also seen necessary since it allows students to expand their minds to the world and this will equip them to compete and thrive in the increasingly networked world (Hishammudin, 2004). Hence, various reading programmes have been implemented in the Malaysian schools with the hope of improving students' reading habits. Views from educators and policy makers were sought to determine the suitable literary texts that may motivate learners to enjoy reading. Various courses and workshops have been conducted by various organizations to educate teachers on the pedagogical aspect. However, one pertinent view that has been ignored and is seen crucial there is the students' perspective on their choice of genre and classroom activities that they enjoy the most. With this view in mind, this

study looks into the secondary Malaysian students' preference of literary text genre and their choice of activities which they find enjoyable.

The following are six research questions that guided the study.

- i. What are students' perception of individual literary texts prescribed for secondary school students?
- ii. Do the students think reading literary texts improves their English language?
- iii. What are the types of activities carried out by English teachers in the classroom while teaching literary texts?
- iv. What are the types of activities enjoyed by the students when reading literary texts?
- v. Which activities do students consider helpful in improving their language proficiency?
- vi. Which literary texts currently used in schools would students recommend for study?

## **A REVIEW OF READING PROGRAMMES IN MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS**

The journey of reading programmes in Malaysian schools can be trailed based on two broad categories; intensive and extensive reading programmes and literature programmes. Reading has been one of the skills emphasized by the MOE which is said to improve the proficiency level of the students. As such, various reading programmes were introduced in the primary schools. For example, in the 70s the New Zealand readers programme was implemented followed by the World Bank reading project in the 80s (Subramaniam, 2003). Various teaching materials were distributed to the schools with the hope that these materials will be beneficial in the learning process. However, most of these materials were not fully utilized by teachers leading to a short lifespan of the programme.

With the shift of the syllabus from communication based to skills-based, the Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca (NILAM) project was introduced in 1988 in lower primary and secondary schools. The aim of this programme was to help students improve their English through reading simple fiction. It was hoped that this programme could enrich students' vocabulary and language content. Specific texts were not prescribed instead reading materials are to be taken from the school resource centre. This programme did not achieve its' objectives due to poor implementation. Students were

burdened with reading as many books as they could and they were required to rewrite the summary of each story without gaining any understanding.

The implementation of language-use syllabus in 2003 resulted in the implementation of Children's contemporary literature programme for English language in 2004 (CDC, 2005). This programme targets students in upper primary level. This move was seen necessary to cater to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is evolving rapidly and challenging. Hence three main domains became the pillars for the language use syllabus; interpersonal, informational and aesthetic. With the interjection of the aesthetic value into the syllabus, besides inculcating reading habits among learners, the children's contemporary literature programme aims for the students to develop an understanding of other societies and culture as well. This is to produce students who are tolerant of other culture. Three prescribed texts per year consisting of short stories and poems are introduced to the students.

The year 2007 sees the emergence of another new programme called the extensive reading programme for rural and low performing schools. Twenty fiction and thirty non fiction stories were selected by Curriculum Development Center (CDC) for this programme and is being monitored by MOE at this moment. This move is seen necessary as to reduce the education gap among learners based on location, socioeconomic status and students' potential as required by the Education Development Master Plan (EDMP) thrust 4. Recently, the Early Literacy through English (ELiTE) programme is being piloted in several primary schools (Nor Rezan Bapoo Hashim, 2008). This project aims to tackle weaker students in Year 1 to master literacy skills. However, this programme is replaced with the Literacy and Numeracy (LINUS) programme which is designed to ensure primary students acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills at the end of 3 years of primary education.

Various programmes were also introduced in secondary schools beginning with the ELRP in 1979. This extension programme aimed to instil reading for pleasure among students as well as to widen their general knowledge (Vethamani, 1991). More than 200 graded literary texts were provided to selected schools. Since it was piloted in fully residential schools, the selection of literary texts did not match the needs of students in non residential schools. Hence, students were not interested in reading these texts since they did not match their proficiency levels. The failure of ELRP led to the implementation of Class Reader Programme in all secondary schools. The aim of this programme was to consolidate the skills taught in ESL classroom. Simplified version of literary texts were selected and graded according to three levels; elementary, intermediate and advance. One teaching period was allocated thus, made it a compulsory programme in the

English syllabus. Teaching files were also distributed to teachers as guidelines to implement this programme. Furthermore, it was monitored by the state educational department and school division in the MOE.

However, this programme failed due to various reasons. A study by Gurnam (1995) indicated that the choice of books selected did not match students' interest since it was restricted to certain sub-genre. Furthermore, this programme limited students' capability to voice their views since the prescribed exercises were used from the materials provided by CDC. Overall, this programme failed to create a positive learning atmosphere. Since it was not examinable, teachers mainly focused on the English language subject which is their priority to prepare the students for examination.

In 2000, another major move by the MOE was seen when literature in English component was introduced in the secondary schools. This programme became a part of the KBSM English language paper. Among the aims of this programme are to boost students' proficiency levels, to enhance their personal development and to broaden their horizon and world-view. This literature component is examinable where 10% is allocated for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination. This has roused many stakeholders especially the teachers and parents. Parents questioned the relevance of literature in their children's future while teachers were not prepared to teach literature since they were not equipped to do so.

The development of various programmes in Malaysian schools over the past thirty years sees changes taking place to boost the language proficiency among students. Among them, the selection of texts was made common nationwide and more organized teaching training are being conducted. A more systematic implementation of programmes was seen with close monitoring from MOE and parents. With the introduction of the assessment of the texts as part of the English language paper led to a drastic change in the learners' mindset where they see the need to read the prescribed texts. The shift of literacy learning through literature has moved towards a more social and cultural interactions when the aesthetic component was added into the syllabus.

Although a great shift has and is taking place in the Malaysian curriculum, with regards to the English language, the emphasis on learners is still lacking (Vethamani, 2003). It is crucial to look at students' perspective on their preference over the texts they are required to read. This paper looks into secondary school students perception on the various literary components introduced in secondary schools. Students' perception on the various activities carried out is also sought.

## THE STUDY

A study was carried out on 110 secondary school students on the perceptions on the teaching of the literature component and their perceptions on the learning activities in the classroom. The students were randomly selected from 3 secondary semi urban and urban schools.

## METHODOLOGY

The researcher developed a questionnaire for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was pilot-tested and found to have a reliability of 0.51. The questionnaire consists of 6 parts that tests students' perception on individual literary texts introduces in schools; their perception if reading literary texts could improve English language proficiency; the types of activities introduced by the English teachers and the activities enjoyed by the students; the types of activities perceived by the students to be helpful in improving their language proficiency and the types of literary texts recommended by the students for study. The questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and they were briefed on how to answer the questions. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, respondents were briefed on how to answer the questions. This was necessary to avoid any unanswered items by the respondents.

This study looks into students' preference on the types of literary genre prescribed by the MOE in enhancing literacy. The types of texts prescribed are shown in the table below.

**TABLE 1**  
Types of genre selected for study in the secondary schools

Form	Genre	Text
1	Short Story	The Pencil (Ali Majod) How Dalat Got Its Name (Heidi Munan) Of Bunga Telor and Bally Shoes (Che Husna Azhari)
	Poetry	Life's Brief Candle (William Shakespeare) The Dead Crow (A. Samad Said) The Lake Isle of Innisfree (W. B. Yeats)
2	Novel	Potato People (Angela Wright)
3	Novel	Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (R. L. Stevenson)

4	Short Story	The Lotus Eater (Somerset Maugham) The Necklace (Guy de Maupassant) The Drover's Wife (Henry Lawson) The Sound Machine (Roald Dahl) Looking for the Rain God (Bessie Head)
	Poetry	If (Rudyard Kipling) Sonnet 18 (William Shakespeare) Si Tenggara's Homecoming (Muhammad Haji Salleh) Monsoon History (Shirley Lim) The Road Not Taken (Robert Frost) There's been a Death in the House Opposite (Emily Dickinson)
5	Novel	The Pearl

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the questionnaire distributed to 110 secondary school students, the findings of the study are presented based on the six major research questions mentioned.

### Students' Perception of Individual Literary Text Prescribed for Secondary School Students

Table 2 below reveals students' preference for particular genre.

**TABLE 2**  
Students' preference on types of genre

Form	Short Stories		Poetry		Novel	
	Like	Dislike	Like	Dislike	Like	Dislike
1	83.3	16.6	50.8	48.3	-	-
2	-	-	-	-	54.9	45.1
3	-	-	-	-	77.9	23.7
4	92.2	7.8	39.2	60.8	-	-
5	-	-	-	-	66.6	33.3

The data analysis indicates the evidence of students' preference for particular genre from Form 1 to Form 5. With regards to the Form 1 texts, most of the students prefer to read short stories compared to poetry. In particular, they love reading *The Pencil* and *Of Bunga Telor and Bally Shoes*. These two local texts are said to be funny and interesting. Furthermore, the students believe these texts provide good advice and moral values. *The Pencil* revolves around the disciplinary problem faced by the protagonist in his school. By losing his favourite pencil, the protagonist becomes rebellious and attempt to take revenge on his friend who stole the pencil. This form of story is preferred by the students since the setting and issue highlighted are familiar to them. *Of Bunga Telor and Bally Shoes* is a story focusing on the Malay custom and tradition where it relates to how the protagonist struggles to prepare himself for his own marriage with a limited budget. Since this story has the element of humour, students find the story funny and interesting. On the other hand, *How Dalat Got Its Name* is least preferred by the students since the story focuses on war and blood shed.

Although there is no conclusive evidence indicating if the students prefer poetry,, the findings indicate that students prefer to read poetry consisting simpler diction and with good moral values. For example, students prefer *The Dead Crow* which they find enjoyable to read. This poem is said to contain important values on preserving the nature which the students could relate to. On the other hand, students do not prefer to read *Life's Brief Candle* and *The Lake Isle of Innesfree* for several reasons. Although *The Lake Isle of Innesfree* shares similar issues as *The Dead Crow* (longing for peace and tranquillity), the former poem is longer and consists of complex diction which the students find difficult to comprehend. Similarly, *Life's Brief Candle* is a long poem with connotative meaning and students are required to grasp the underlying meaning of each line for comprehension. Therefore, these two poems are perceived as boring and contain negative elements.

The students were exposed to two novels in Form 2 and Form 3; *Potato People* and *Pantom of the Opera*. The students' preference is *Pantom of the Opera* which they find interesting and enjoyable. On the other hand, *Potato People* is perceived as a difficult text to read and boring. *Pantom of the Opera* is a novel dealing with love and sacrifice. Students are able to relate to the issues highlighted in this novel. However, *Potato People* focuses on the suffering of the Irish people due to poor harvest of potato and colonialization of the English landlord from England. The issues highlighted in this novel are unfamiliar to the students; hence they find it difficult to relate to the story.



Among the Form 4 short stories, the *Lotus Eater* and *The Necklace* are identified as interesting and meaningful. These two stories deal with the hardship faced by the protagonists. In *The Necklace*, materialism leads the protagonist to suffer throughout her life working hard to payoff the necklace she lost. Where else in *The Lotus Eater*, misjudgment by the protagonist leads him to insanity at the later stage of his life. These types of stories are mostly preferred by students which values they could relate to. On the other hand, *Looking for the Rain God*, is perceived as a difficult text to comprehend besides being boring and uninteresting. Several reasons are identified. Students are not able to relate to the issues highlighted in the story. The differences in culture is the root cause where the belief of the existence of the rain god is not accepted in the students' culture. Since the story is against the students' culture and belief, they are not able to relate to the story; hence find the story boring.

As for the poem, *The Road Not Taken* is considered interesting which has good advice and meaningful. Ironically, Malaysian poems; *Si Tenggang's Homecoming* and *Monsoon History* are perceived as boring and difficult to comprehend. Among the reasons are these two poems are very long and that they reflect negative themes.

As for novels, the Form 5 students find *The Pearl* to be an interesting novel to read. It is said to be interesting which has good moral values and is easy to understand. This novel consists simpler diction for students to read and understand. Furthermore, the story is perceived as interesting since it deals with the sacrifices one has to make in search of wealth.

The findings of the data indicate students' capability of analyzing their own preference of the literary texts. For example, the length of the story is seen as an indicator for their likes or dislikes of certain texts. The choice of words found in the literary texts also has a strong influence in the students' preference. The more difficult the words are the more likely students tend to shy away from the texts. Students are also seen to be able to make value judgment of the literary texts. Most of the texts identified by the students indicate the existence of moral values which students could relate to. However there are certain short stories that students are not able to associate themselves with the issues highlighted in the texts. One example is *Looking for the Rain God* which is an alien culture for them hence, it became a difficult text to comprehend. Ironically, local poems were classified as difficult texts by the students. One of the reasons provided was the length of poems as a hindrance for them to read and enjoy the texts.

## **Students' Views on Whether Literary Texts Improved Their English Language Proficiency**

Based on the questionnaire, 84.4% of the students agree that reading literary texts can improve the English language. They find literary texts are able to improve their vocabulary, hence able to increase their proficiency level depending on the features found in the selected texts. For example they find good texts are those that are easy to understand and interesting. On the other hand, factors that will not contribute to the improvement of the English language are texts that consist of difficult words that lead to difficulty in understanding the meaning of the story.

## **The Types of Activities Utilised by the English Language Teachers in the Literature Classroom**

A set of questions was also set to seek students' preference on the activities that was carried out by the English teacher in the classroom. The types of activities carried out by the teachers are shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
Activities carried out by the English teacher

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Listening to teachers explanation of poem line by line	98
Answering comprehension questions	96.4
Reading aloud	96.4
Discussion with classmates	89
Giving opinion about texts	82.7

The top five activities carried out by the English teachers are giving explanation of poems line by line, answering comprehension questions, reading aloud, discussion with classmates and giving opinion of the literary texts. It is clearly evident that the classroom activities carried out by the English teachers do not reflect the teaching of literacy. Most of the activities carried out are teacher-directed to prepare students for the examination. Furthermore, mere explanation by the teacher can hamper meaningful learning to take place. It leads learners to receive information passively without being able to think critically and making rationalization on the issues highlighted. Learning activities in the classroom should go beyond the examination hall and provide students with the opportunity to develop their literacy skills and as an individual.

## The Types of Activities Students Enjoyed in the Literature Classroom

Table 4 below shows the types of activities enjoyed by the students in the classroom.

**TABLE 4**  
Types of activities enjoyed by the students

No.	Activities Enjoyed	Percentage	Activities not Enjoyed	Percentage
1	Discussion with classmates	58	Giving opinion about texts	36.4
2	Listening to teachers explanation of poem line by line	49	Answering comprehension questions	36.4
3	Mind mapping	26.4	Gap filling activities	31.8
4	Drama activities	26.4	-	-

The choice of activities preferred by the students indicated their preference for student-centered activities such as having discussions with their peers, mind mapping and drama activities. The students also indicated their preference for listening to teachers' explanation of the literary works line by line. However, they do not enjoy providing their own opinion about the text, answering comprehension questions, and doing gap filling activities. They find these activities boring although they are aware that the activities help to understand the text better.

## Students' Perception of Activities which they Considered Helpful in Improving their Language Proficiency

The data analysis on the students' perception on the activities they find most helpful in improving their English language is shown in Table 5.

**TABLE 5**  
Students' perception on activities that can improve their English language

	Activities	Percentage	Reasons
1	Listening to teachers explanation of poem line by line	29.8	Makes texts easy to understand
2	Reading aloud	21.2	Help pronunciation
3	Drama activities	12.5	Help understand text better
4	Discussion with classmates	9.6	Help understand text better
5	Mind mapping activities	9.6	Help to remember information better

			Help understand text better
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Overall, the students find five activities that they find helpful in improving their English language. These activities are listening to teacher’s explanation of poem line by line, reading aloud, drama activities, discussion with classmates and mind mapping activities. These activities are said to assist them in understanding the texts better. Based on the finding, it is important to note that most of the activities carried out in the classroom are not language-based activities. Mostly, the activities are very teacher centered where they supply the meaning of the texts without eliciting personal responses from the students.

### **Present Literary Texts which Students Would Recommend to Other Students for Study**

Students were asked to give their views on which texts they found interesting and would recommend that they continued to be used with other students. The texts recommended by the students for study are shown in Table 6.

**TABLE 6**  
 Recommended texts by students

<b>Short Stories</b>	<b>Poetry</b>	<b>Novel</b>
The Lotus Eater	The Dead Crow	Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
The Pencil	The Road Not Taken	The Phantom of the Opera
Of Bunga Telur and Bally Shoes	Sonnet 18	The Pearl

Based on Table 5, the highly recommended texts by the students are *The Lotus Eater*, *The Dead Crow*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Pencil*, *The Road Not Taken* and *Phantom of the Opera*. These texts are recommended based on three reasons. First, the students find these texts easy to understand. Second they find these texts consist of good moral values which they see important. Third, these texts are considered interesting which is an important feature that makes them read the texts.

Based on the data analysis, 88.6% of the students find poetry a difficult genre to comprehend. Among the texts, they rated *Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *Si Tenggara’s Homecoming* and *Monsoon History* as unsuitable texts to read. These texts are considered boring and difficult to understand. Although 2 poems are local texts, the length of the poems are considered as a hindrance for the students to grasp the meaning of the poems. Students also find *Potato People* and *Looking for the Rain God* as unsuitable short stories. These texts are also considered boring and difficult to comprehend.

Furthermore, the background of the texts are alien to these students, hence they are unable to connect themselves to the events found in the stories.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings from this study have raised several issues that need to be reconsidered by teachers and implementers of the present programme. It is crucial to look into the students' needs when it comes to literary text selection. The issues highlighted in the texts should reflect the issues that students could relate to. This would give room for them to view their opinion, by using the language. The length of the texts is another feature that needs to be looked into. This study implies that the length of texts may actually interfere with students' literacy learning. Culture has a strong influence in the students' preference for literary works. If the culture is not familiar to the students, they are not motivated to read the text. Familiarity of cultural values and themes are crucial for reading to be interesting and enjoyable. Hence, there is a need to take into consideration the types of culture reflected in the literary works since English literature is not a familiar genre to these students.

Vethamani (2008) emphasizes the crucial role of a teacher when it comes to the implementation of any school programmes. Teachers can make or break a good programme depending on the types of activities carried out by them. The types of activities carried out in the classroom should lead students to enhance literacy learning. One way of achieving this is by using literary texts as the basis of classroom activities which is termed as extension activities (Vethamani, 1991). Extension activities refer to activities that go beyond the text by infusing students' experiences with the knowledge of the world. These activities are crucial in realizing the nation's Vision 2020 that emphasizes on developing human capital that is comprehensive, progressive, high moral and ethical.

The findings of this study also imply that we are underestimating students' potential. Instead of talking about a set of curriculum and a set of expectation, we need to find the right reading texts that will allow students to master literacy for their future. The more we understand the students' preference the better we can serve them.

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