

The Problems in reading skills of English among rural primary school pupils

Problemas en las habilidades de lectura del inglés entre alumnos de escuelas primarias rurales

Mokhsin Abdul Ghaffar¹

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia - MALAYSIA

mokhsin_badar88@yahoo.com

Azlina Abdul Aziz¹

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia - MALAYSIA

azlina1@ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Reading skills is a basic language skills for pupils in primary schools. This skill is very important for the pupils to achieve a proficient level in the target language. Therefore, this study aims to identify the problems regarding the reading skills in English among the rural primary school pupils. The participants consist of 150 primary school pupils studying in Standard 4 to Standard 6 in a rural primary school in Sarawak, Malaysia. This study is a descriptive survey research utilizing the use of a questionnaire that encompasses the personal background information and the problems that are faced in reading skills.

Keywords: Reading skills, rural primary school, primary school pupils, English language skills, remedial education.

RESUMEN

Las habilidades de lectura son habilidades lingüísticas básicas para los alumnos de las escuelas primarias. Esta habilidad es muy importante para que los alumnos alcancen un nivel competente en el idioma de destino. Por lo tanto, este estudio tiene como objetivo identificar los problemas relacionados con las habilidades de lectura en inglés entre los alumnos de la escuela primaria rural. Los participantes consisten en 150 alumnos de primaria que estudian en el Estándar 4 al Estándar 6 en una escuela primaria rural en Sarawak, Malasia. Este estudio es una investigación de encuesta descriptiva que utiliza el uso de un cuestionario que abarca la información de fondo personal y los problemas que enfrentan las habilidades de lectura.

Palabras clave: habilidades de lectura, escuela primaria rural, alumnos de primaria, habilidades en el idioma inglés, educación de recuperación.

¹ Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Mara

² Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Ama Baafra, Todd and Leigh (2014), reading is defined as a cognitive process of decoding symbols to make meaning. Meanwhile, Perfetti and Stafura (2014) stated that reading is an active process of constructing meanings of words. The reader could direct information towards a goal and emphasizes their attention when he or she reads with a purpose. Reading is also a thinking process where the reader uses his or her prior knowledge. During this process, the reader uses different ways to comprehend what they are reading, organizing ideas into themes, and uses textual clues to find the meanings of new words.

There are few reading skills that a child needs for his or her childhood literacy (Bainbridge 2019). The first one is the phonemic awareness. It is the child's ability to listen and play with the sounds of the particular language and create words using that sounds. This occurs naturally within the normal course of the child's development. The indicator that a child has phonemic awareness when he or she begins to play with small pieces of a word as they are familiar with different rearrangements of sounds. Secondly, print awareness. Exposure to books and other reading materials could foster this awareness and the introduction of the letters of the alphabets to the children. Next, active vocabulary and passive vocabulary. Active vocabulary are words uses regularly in speech and writing while passive vocabulary are words interpreted through context. Besides that, spelling is also crucial reading skill in a child's literacy development. The concept of arrangement of letters to form words helps children to read earlier especially when encountering new words (Byrne 2014). Lastly, the reading comprehension skills. It is the ability to read and understand something that has been read and are able to make interpretations and identify hints in the texts.

Shea and Ceprano (2017) mentioned that one of the challenges that reading teachers faced in their classroom is poor reading comprehension among pupils. They also narrated that pupils were unable to use different skills and strategies in order to stimulate their thinking and construct meaning from the text which later on prevent the pupils from achieving reading proficiency. Meanwhile, Cambridge Baseline Report 2013 (Ministry of Education 2013) revealed that only 43 percent of Standard Six ESL learners were able to achieve the lowest level, which is A1, in their Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) reading proficiency test. It shows that our primary school pupils still unable to "read and understand a range of English texts for information and enjoyment" as outlined in the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) English syllabus (Ministry of Education 2012).

It is important to identify the problems in the reading skills among the primary school pupils in rural primary schools as an initial step to structure an intervention action to curb the problem in precise and appropriate manner (Hanafiah & Md Yunus, 2016; Jagig & Wan Mohammad, 2016; Parvani & Md Yunus 2018; Wong & Abdul Aziz, 2019; Tham and Mohd Said, 2019.). This is to ensure that the literacy rate among primary school pupils in the rural primary schools could be improvised and closing the literacy gap between urban primary school pupils and the rural primary school pupils.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main objective of this study is to identify the problems regarding the reading skills in English among the rural primary school pupils and the pupils' perceptions towards the teacher's teaching on the reading skills. This study is conducted to answer two research questions, (a) What are the problems regarding reading skills in English among the pupils in rural primary school? (b) What are pupils' perceptions towards the teacher's teaching in terms of reading skills?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Reading Skills in English Language

Reading is one of the ways of to get information and serve as the basic self-development towards acquiring knowledge. The purpose of reading to understand the content of the text gives meaning to the reader (Hedgcock & Ferris 2018). The ability to read is a valued skill and it is a dynamic process which requires meaningful and active communication between the reader and the writer. Reading is also one's ability to recognize the visual input and connecting that input with the sounds and shapes to make meanings. Reading comprehension depends on the combination of linguistics knowledge, cognitive styles and the reading experiences. Therefore, the reading skill is the basic requirement towards a successful teaching and learning process in multidisciplinary of subjects in schools. A good grasp of reading skills could ensure a higher potential and achievement in English and other subjects as well.

According to Ministry of Education (2003), each pupil is different in terms of their experiences, behaviors, values, talents and abilities. Therefore, the teachers should understand the need of remedial activities in the classrooms to overcome the problems in reading skills among pupils in rural schools. It is undeniable that many efforts have been done by the Ministry of Education, State Education Departments and District Education Offices to outline various programs such as Kelas Intervensi Awalan membaca dan Menulis (KIA2M), Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS), Program Bimbingan Membaca dan Menulis (PROBIM) and Program Pemulihan Asas Membaca, Menulis dan Mengira (PROTIM). These programs were carried out to help pupils and fulfill their learning needs. These remedial programs is one of the ways to overcome learning problems in pupils especially in reading and writing skills. The teacher needs to fulfill the learnings needs of these weak pupils so that they could strive towards achieving their full potential and confidence to be able to compete with their mainstream friends.

Teachers have a huge responsibility in ensuring that the language skills of these pupils are in accordance to the standard

level as outlined by the Ministry of Education in the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) documents. According to Roselan (2003), language skills is an important basic skill and should be emphasized in the teaching and learning process that occurs in the classrooms. The teacher who is the responsible person to carry out the curriculum should have put more concern towards achieving the curriculum objectives to ensure that the aspiration of the education system could be achieved.

3.2 Problems in Reading Skills

Primary school pupils are future assets of the country to continue the effort in modernizing the nation. However, there is a huge separation gap in developing young generations and balancing individual potential. Emphases in the concept of multiple intelligences and individual differences make the remedial education as one of the choice to help them to be successful in life and to contribute to the success of our education system. With that regards, remedial is an approach which differs from mainstream classrooms in the national school system. According to Ovando and Combs (2018), remedial education focuses on restoring 'deficiency' in pupils' learning skills. The issue of slow learners is worrying not only parents, but also society and the government. It is believed that low academic achievement and learning disabilities are influence by many factors such as psychological, biological and environmental factor (Newman & Newman 2017).

Lower intellectual and psychological level among pupils could be the result of different factors such as genetics, physical disabilities and environments could contribute towards difficulties in learning and memorizing the information that is being taught by the teacher (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014). Besides that, health problems and emotional instability could also lead to learning problems. Pupils who inherit lower intellectual capability might shows different sorts of emotional distress such as anxiety, fear, anger and different other emotions which in turns will surely affect their focus towards their learning (Sharp 2014). There are also biological problems such as physical heath and neurological functions which might affect the learning curve. Therefore, intelligence that stems from high efficiency of neuron cells in the brains not only create knowledge but also gives meaningful experiences.

Environmental problems is an external phenomenon that occurs from the school system and pupils language development. School systems which practice complex curriculum and less concern about different needs of pupils could illustrate the inefficiency of school administration aspect (Beare, Caldwell & Millikan 2018). When the concept of multiple intelligences among pupils is abandon, the separation gap between pupils is created. Moreover, there are number of pupils that were left out from the mainstream learning because the insufficient of correct use of language. Lack of exposure of the language exposes the pupils to the problems in using and utilizing the language.

According to Suggate (2016), the effects of particular factors could create problems in the pupils' acquisition of reading skills. Weak reading skills amongst pupils might contribute to the pupils being lack of confidence and other disciplinary problems. Ongoing failures from the lack of confidence could bring the pupils towards low self-esteem. Aggressive behaviors, being negative, being childish and dispirited are all signs of serious emotional problems. This could jeopardize their ability to acquire the language skills effectively.

According to Sugiarto and Sumarsono (2014), the problems in acquiring reading skills which make pupils not interested in English is the result from their inability to master the subject. Among the problems are confusion between lowercase and uppercase while reading, unclear pronunciation of words and omitting difficult words. These problems slow down the reading process and make the pupils cannot comprehend the text that is being read. Besides that, the pupils also unable and uninterested to find information on the visual stimuli that was given by the teacher. According to Bennett (2014), reading is an interaction process between the text and the reader's imagination. Therefore, teachers should diversify the teaching techniques so that the teaching and learning process could attract pupils' interest and they could learn better.

When a pupil does not master the reading skills, it causes them not mastering the basic skills as well, that is, verbal skills. According to Ehri (2017), among the weaknesses in verbal skills are wrong pronunciation of letters that has close or almost similar shapes and sounds. These make pupils confuse of the order of words, sentences and intonation of the text. Pupils' inability of both skills could be presented in their writing. Pupils' deficiency in reading skills make them uninterested in learning and loss of focus (Akubuilu, Okorie, Onwuka & Uloh-Bethels 2015). In addition, external factors could also be the cause to the problem of mastery of reading skills such as disability, illness and genetics. This is coupled with environmental factors such as poverty and lack of parental attention is also a contributor to the problem in the mastery of reading skills.

3.3 The Teaching of Reading Skills

One of the discussions regarding reading is the appropriate age for children to start learning to read.. Some feel that teaching children reading before kindergarten overloads their brains, and others believe that a child should learns to read as soon as possible. It turns out that the answer is more complex than what one would think of. Literacy is a complicated skill which comprises different components such as psychological, social, and linguistic. According to Strickland (1990), children could learn pre-literacy skills from infancy onward.

Tompkins, Campbell, Green and Smith (2014) suggested that children who learn to read before kindergarten are unable to handle such a complex skill because the stages of reading progress are much more diverse than just being able to read books autonomously. Pupils could have better academic potential when they learn basic reading skills before kindergarten (Claessens, Engel & Curran 2014). According to Torgeson (2004), children start to develop abilities that will help them learn to read later on when they start picking up language. Some researchers also believed that the process of early childhood literacy starts in infancy and these essential skills that lead to reading later on are called pre-reading skills (Paris & Hamilton 2014).

There are also other factors that might affect the method of pupils picking up these skills. For example, pupils from low-income families read less compared to pupils from high-income families (Owen 2018). This resulted in pre-reading skills gap between the pupils with different family socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, some learning disabilities like dyslexia or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) could also have effects towards a child's literacy development (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014). However, parents and teachers could take preventive steps to overcome these deficiencies. A pupil could develop literacy as early as he or she could but all children should be learning pre-reading skills before they enter primary school. This responsibility falls on parents and any resources provided to them during early childhood (Mason 1980). And after that, families and teachers should cooperate to provide an inclusive literacy education through the pupils' schooling years.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research design chosen for this study is descriptive survey. According to Mohd Majid Konting (2005), descriptive survey is a study used to illustrate a scenario that happened. The researcher believed that this research design is apt to identify the problems regarding reading skills in English among pupils in rural primary school.

The research data were collected, processed and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. The result was presented in descriptive form using mean and standard deviation. The respondents were consisted of 150 pupils in a rural primary school in Sarawak. The overall distribution of the respondents are 50 pupils of Standard 4, 50 pupils of Standard 5 and 50 pupils of Standard 6. The choice of these respondents are based on the ease of access to the respondents. This is in line with suggestion by Mohd Majid Konting (2005) that the choice of respondents must be able to minimize the costs, energy and duration of data collection.

The collection of data were based on the distribution of questionnaire that encompasses the background information of the respondents, the problems regarding reading skills and the pupils' perception towards the teachers' teaching process. The data were collected by the aid of the teachers in helping the pupils to answer the questionnaire given.

5. FINDINGS

The result shows that there are problems in reading skills of English among pupils in rural primary school. The overall mean for problems in reading skills of English among pupils is mean=3.69 and standard deviation=0.89. It was also found out that the failure of understanding the content of the text read is the highest with mean=3.53 and standard deviation=0.74. This is among the problems that lead to pupils failed to understand the information that they have read. Besides that, pupils were found out to not be able to comprehend the meaning of the sentences that they have read with mean=3.37 and standard deviation=0.63. The inability to acquire these basic skills has resulted in pupils' poor grasp of the skills which require them to list down ideas or classifying the contents of the texts. Meanwhile, the poor reading skills has also lead pupils to not being able to read mechanically, both skimming and scanning with the mean=3.03 and standard deviation=0.94 and pupils were found out to be feeling tired while reading in long duration with mean=3.03 and standard deviation=0.94. (Refer Table 1).

Table 1: The Problems in Reading Skills

No.	Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Did not understand the content of the text	3.53	0.74
2	Did not understand the meaning of the	3.37	0.63
3	Unable to skim and scan the text	3.03	0.94
4	Tired and bored reading the text	3.03	0.94

The finding also shows that the problems that exist in reading skills could be curbed by planning and executing teaching and learning process that is interesting and conducive by the teacher. Besides that, a conducive learning environment and supports from the teachers could motivate pupils to keep learning. The finding also shows that additional reading exercises could uplift pupils' reading skills with mean=3.63 and standard deviation=0.51 and the drill reading technique has helped pupils in pronunciation and fluency in reading with mean=3.63 and standard deviation=0.64. The pupils believed that good reading skills could turn the reading activities in the classroom as interesting activities with mean=3.53 and standard deviation=0.52. Besides that, good teachers' guidance (mean=3.47, standard deviation=0.70) and the use of suitable teaching aids (mean=3.44, standard deviation=0.68) are also believed could lead to meaningful and effective reading activities. (Refer Table 2).

Table 2: Pupils' Perceptions towards Teachers' Teaching of Reading Skills

No.	Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Additional reading exercises	3.63	0.51
2	Drill reading technique	3.63	0.64
3	Interesting reading lessons	3.53	0.52
4	Good teachers' guidance	3.47	0.70
5	Interesting and suitable teaching aids	3.44	0.68

6. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are few suggestions that could be looked into in order to improve the teaching performance and the pupils' learning potential to ensure the reading skills of English could be elevated among primary school pupils in rural schools. Firstly, the teaching of basic reading skills should be given important priority. The teaching of English language should be delivered in a more interesting approach with the diverse usage of teaching materials which would develop the pupils' reading skills. The use of different and appropriate approach would make pupils to enjoy the lesson and feeling less burnout during the process of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Secondly, the use of appropriate teaching aids, in-line with the pupils' intellectual ability and level of development during the lesson could motivate pupils in the learning process. The use of teaching aids should be used optimally so that the learning process would be a meaningful and leave a positive effects in the pupil's self. This is as suggested by Deaton (2015) that the use of media could enhance the two-way communication between the teacher and pupils in the teaching and learning process.

Besides that, the school administration should also be consistent in helping the pupils to master the reading skills during the remedial class activities or interventions. Seminars and courses that are beneficial for the teachers should be given priority in order to give the teachers new and updated information, technology and approaches in helping pupils with reading problems. There should also be systematic assessments to be done to evaluate the efficiency of teaching and learning process of those problematic pupils.

Lastly, the teachers should have positive perceptions towards pupils with reading problems and realise that these pupils deserve to be treated with equity and equality while believing they have the same potential if were given the appropriate guidance and help. In addition, the teachers need patience and perseverance to help these pupils to achieve their full potential. The Ministry of Education should also organized more courses and workshops for teachers to be more knowledgeable in managing issues regarding reading problems so that the reading problems among pupils could be curbed and eventually eliminated.

7. CONCLUSION

Pupils' weakness in reading skills could affect the potential and motivation in acquiring other skills in the English language. The finding shows that all the respondents agreed that teacher's ability and creativity could change their perceptions towards them achieving higher potential and success in learning. The close cooperation between teachers and school administration could create conducive and safe school and learning climate to stimulate pupils to be more motivated to learn. Besides that, teachers who are skillful and able to absorb the approaches, techniques and activities and structuring learning stages to create a set of creative and innovative teaching and learning process are deemed to give positive and meaningful impacts towards the pupils. Teachers must have also have a balance amount of content and pedagogical knowledge in teaching English so that the teaching and learning of English language in primary schools could be improvised as a whole.

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