

Whither Reading in Malaysia: Confronting Reading Reluctancy Among Students

by

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Introduction

It seems useful to begin this paper by providing an insight into the profile of three sample Malaysian readers that participated in this study on readership behaviour.

Student 'X' is an 18 year old Malay who is attending matriculation school. The student

- always reads a variety of Malay newspapers;
- reads several Malay magazines and Malay books;
- spends 6-8 hours a week reading Malay materials;
- is computer literate;
- is likely to be a female;
- comes from a middle-class family with a family income of RM1000 and above;
- is exposed to a variety of reading materials at home;
- has parents who read themselves and encourage her to read;
- has friends and Malay school language teachers who encourage her to read in Malay;
- has a school library that provides a variety of Malay materials;
- watches television and listens to radio frequently; and
- communicates in both languages with her teachers.

In this study, the student above is perceived as a *habitual reader in Malay* (but not in English).

Student 'Y' is another 18 year old Malay attending matriculation school. The student

- rarely reads the newspaper;
- has not read any books in the past three months;
- spends less than one hour a week reading Malay or English materials;
- is computer-illiterate;
- is likely to be a male;
- comes from a middle-class family with a family income of less than RM1000;
- is not exposed to a variety of reading materials at home;
- has parents who do not read themselves and do not encourage him to read;
- has friends and school language teachers who did not encourage him to read;
- has a school library that provides a variety of materials;
- watches television and listens to radio frequently; and
- communicates only in the Malay language with his teachers.

The above student in this study is perceived as a *reluctant reader in Malay and in English.*

Student 'Z' is also a 18 year old Malay attending matriculation school. The student

- always reads a variety of Malay and English newspapers;
- reads several Malay and English magazines and books;
- spends 6-8 hours or more a week reading Malay and English materials;
- is computer literate;
- is likely to be a female;
- comes from a middle-class family with a family income of RM1000 and above.

- is exposed to a variety of reading materials in English and Malay at home;
- has parents who read themselves in Malay and in English and encourage her to read in both languages;
- has friends and school English and Malay language teachers who encouraged her to read;
- has a school library that provides a wide collection of reading materials and a variety of materials in English and Malay;
- watches English and Malay television programmes and listens to English and Malay radio programmes frequently; and
- communicates in both languages with her teachers.

The above student is termed as a *habitual reader in both Malay and English* in this study.

The above three samples bring to our attention some of the variables related to reading in the Malaysian matriculation student context. Popular opinions of pressure groups, teachers and parents have voiced fears that the literary world, specifically the print form is breaking down everywhere and the historical change in communications technology will require us to re-vision the ways we think about literacy engagement.

This article shares research findings of a study on readership behaviour completed this year. The main argument here is that we have to face up to a changed reality with the development of communications technology and for reading to remain meaningful, it is essential that young people learn not only to read but they cultivate reading habits for lifelong learning. While new forms of reading texts (mass and multimedia) have emerged, it is still not certain if communications technology will be used to maintain their reading for pleasure and lifelong learning. While a habitual reader will read the

print as well as the electronic texts, the reluctant reader will continue to reject reading. This paper examines several variables that contribute to habitual reading and reading reluctance and proposes some strategies for countering reading reluctance among Malaysian students.

Background of the study

It is widely recommended that the enterprise of developing reading habits has to start at an early part of one's life and that there should be a conducive reading environment to stimulate lifelong reading (Ambigapathy, 1997, 1996, 1993; Weinberger, 1996; Baker, L et al 1996). Students in Malaysia, however, for the most of the time have often associated reading with academic tasks and not for knowledge or pleasure (Sunday Star, May 26, 1991). This implies that students who have the ability to read are not using this ability in a significant way for self or social development.

The formation of readers' interests and habits is determined by a number of factors such as social values of their society, school, family and environment. Each factor has its own function and promotes the development of readers' personalities. For example, the frequency of literacy events in the home is linked closely to the students' personal focus and involvement in the literacy events. Parents who create a friendly environment that nurtures reading by providing space, materials, encouragement and example will promote the love for reading (Ambigapathy, 1997; Greaney, 1996).

The cultivation of reading habits is also influenced by a range of other factors like exposure to media and computers. We are currently living in an era where much public discussion centres on television, video, multi-channelled satellite broadcasting, interactive cable systems.

CD-ROM, e-mail and the internet. One study investigating media exposure among young people in the Klang Valley has observed that in a week, these young people spend about 14.6 hours on television, 3.4 hours on video, 4.1 hours on computers, 16.3 hours on radio, 7.11 hours on newspapers and 4.7 hours on books and comics (The Star, May 8, 1997). The above findings suggest that the visual representation is becoming arguably more important than the printed word.

While Malaysia is trying to propel the people into the front-line of the global information age, it is important to ensure that the education that students experience will enable them to negotiate actively with a variety of texts in the print, visual and electronic forms. It is also essential that the family, the school and the wider community share a common responsibility for preparing young people for a life in which mediated knowledge, information and entertainment will increasingly play a major role in shaping their ideas, beliefs, values, choices and decisions.

Research Design

This study was interested in investigating the home and school literacy practices and their relationships with the emergent literacy knowledge among schooling students. The study sought to examine both the home and school settings; the time spent on reading per week, activeness in acquisition of reading materials, the variety of newspapers, books and magazines read and the availability of the reading area.

Two hundred and fifty seven (257) matriculations students (pre-university) from two Malaysian universities were invited to participate

in this study. This article reports some of key findings that have emerged in this study.

The ethnic background of students were as follows:

Ethnicity

Malay:250

Chinese:

2

Others:

5

Questionnaires were distributed to all the 257 respondents. The items in the questionnaire were related to selected personal background factors related to the respondents; home factors, school factors; exposure to language; attitudes towards languages and reading and readership behaviour.

For the purposes of analysis and discussion, this study has discarded the seven non-Malay students and has focused on the Malay students only. The study thus involved 250 Malay students, out of which 72% were females and 28% were males. The ethnic pattern is consistent with the enrolment of students where almost all matriculation programs in Malaysian institutions of higher learning is composed mainly of Malay students. The gender proportion reflects the composition of student population in Malaysian universities.

The average age of the sample population in this study was 18 years and all the students had obtained the Malaysian Certificate of Education (equivalent to the O-levels) with passes in both Malay and English Languages (Refer to Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1 Distribution of the Respondents by Gender and English Language Grade (SPM)

Grade	Sex	
	Male (%)	Female (%)
A1	15	19
A2	7	6
C3	18	24
C4	15	23
C5	20	19
C6	14	4
P7	8	5
P8	3	-
Total	100	100

Table 2 Distribution of the Respondents by Gender and Malay Language Grade (SPM)

Grade	Sex	
	Male (%)	Female (%)
A1	32	43
A2	12	23
C3	28	20
C4	18	8
C5	6	5
C6	4	1
P7	-	-
P8	-	-
Total	100	100

Analysis and discussion

This study aimed to examine variables influencing readership behaviour and the impact of computer exposure on reading.

The study showed that 70% of the matriculation students were reluctant readers in English, 30% were reluctant readers in Malay and only 18% were habitual readers in Malay and English.

It was further observed that 79% of the students spent less than one hour in a week reading in English for pleasure while 88% used less than four hours in a week to read materials in Malay.

Even as far as specific reading materials like books, magazines and newspapers is concerned, the study has found that students did not register a high interest in reading (See Fig. 1, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). For example, less than 10% of the students indicated that they spend more than 4 hours in a week reading English and Malay magazines. The data above supports the finding that students spend very little time on reading.

This is a disturbing finding as these selected students consist of an elite group; that is these students were the selected few who had made it into the programme because of their excellent results at the Malaysian Certificate of Education. These are the group of people who should serve as reading models. As indicated earlier in this paper, habitual readers come from homes where parents are reading models and come from schools where friends and teachers are reading models. If these students do not read, then they are going to contribute to another generation of non-readers – let alone, be leaders who in turn will chart the growth of the nation.

Figure 1 Time Spent Reading English and Malay Magazines in a week

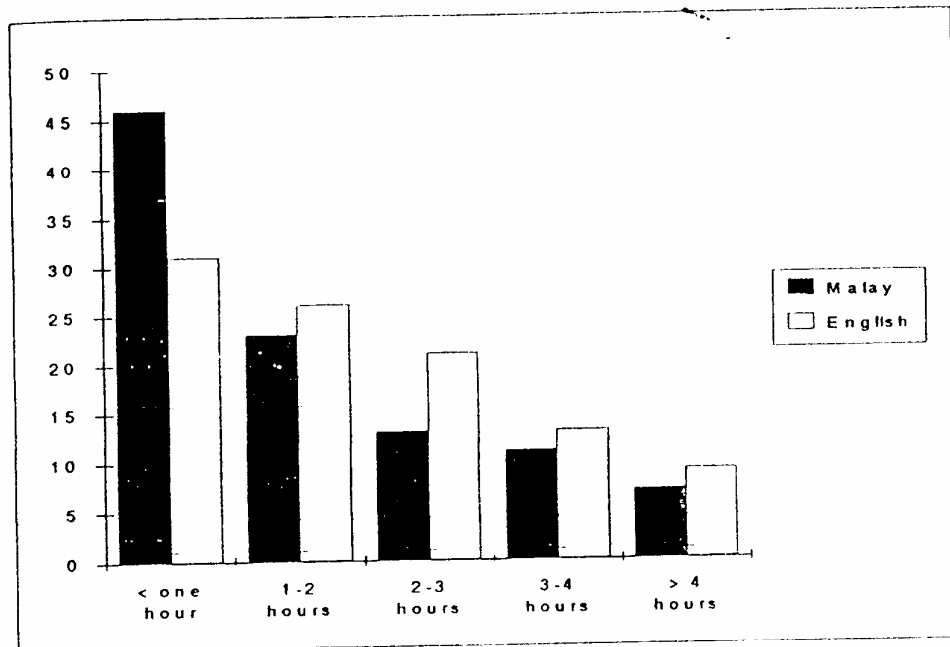


Figure 2 Time Spent Reading English and Malay Newspapers in a week

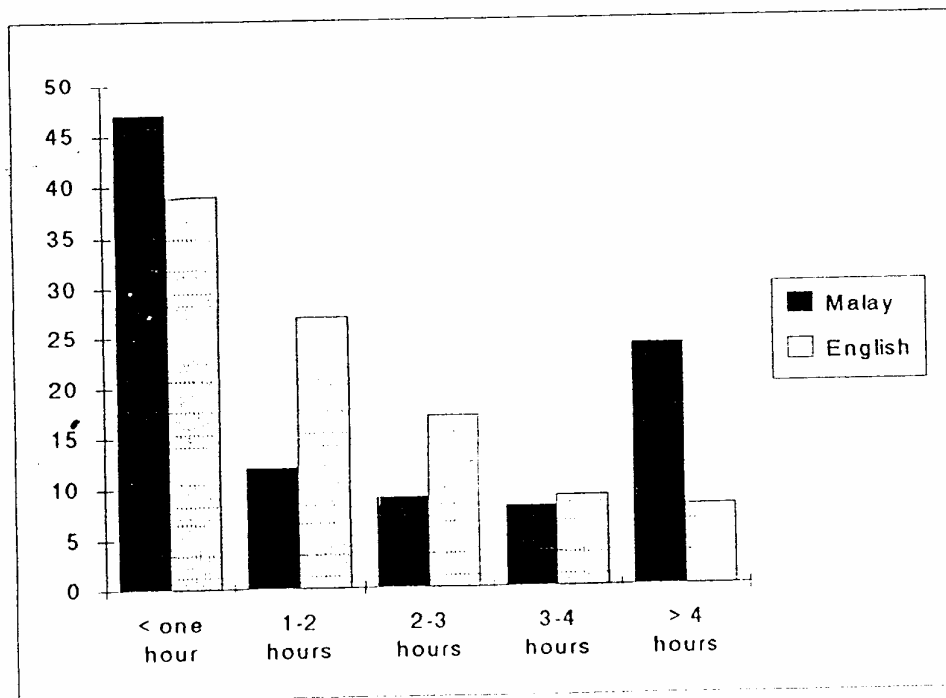
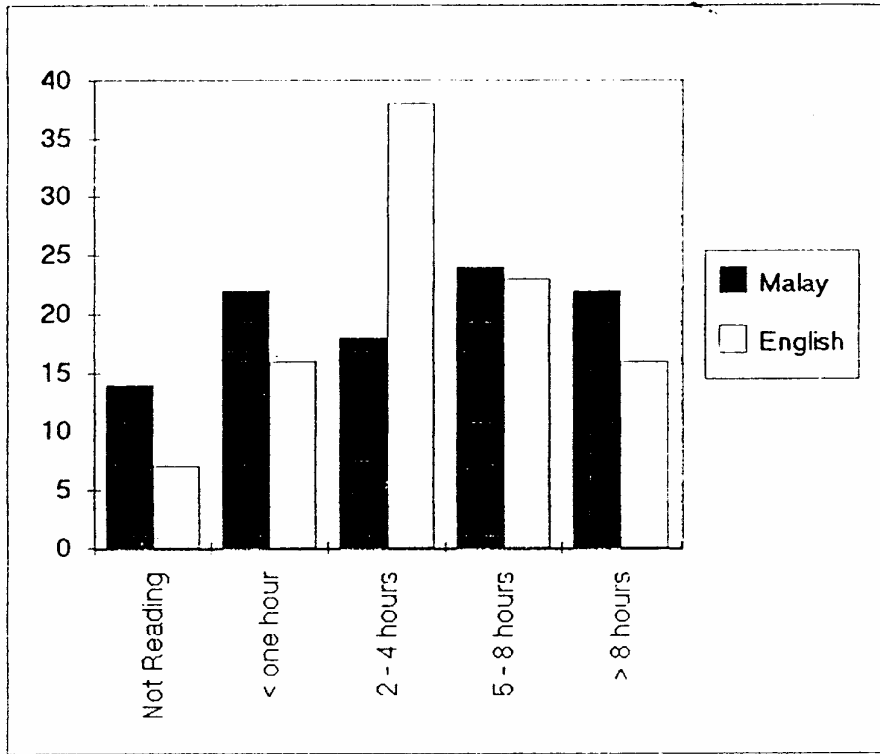


Figure 3 Time Spent Reading Books in a Month



Home

In examining home setting, it was found that 99% of the students come from homes whose parents have at least completed secondary schooling. About 64% of the parents' income exceeds RM800 and 90% of the parents are employed. As indicated in Table 3 and 4, we also found that students from higher family income obtained better grades in Malay and English languages compared with those from families with lower income.

The influence of parents on the reading skills and habits of the children is a significant factor in the formation of reading habits. Parents who shared reading activities with their children motivate them to enjoy reading. The respondents (31%) recorded that it was fathers who introduced reading materials to them while 59% pointed out that it was mothers who introduced reading materials to them. For parents who read to their children, the study has found that 6% of mothers read stories in Malay while 2% of fathers read in Malay. The case for reading stories in English is as follows: 3% of mothers read in English to their children while 1% of fathers read to their children in English.

Encouragement is a helpful influence, for example receiving books as presents; in this study, it was noted that 17% of the students received books and other reading materials as presents. The above findings suggest that parents have an important contribution to make, both to the development of reading skills and encouraging the leisure of lifelong reading habit.

School

As far as the school context was concerned, 79% of the students came from schools where a variety of materials in English and Malay language was available.

Table3 Distribution of the Respondents by Family Income and Malay Language Grade (SPM)

Grade	Income (RM)				
	<400.00	401-800	801-1200	1201-1600	>1600
A1	33%	35%	37%	54%	44%
A2	18%	15%	26%	15%	25%
C3	19%	32%	23%	19%	12%
C4	15%	14%	10%	-	11%
C5	4%	4%	2%	12%	6%
C6	11%	-	2%	-	2%
P7	-	-	-	-	-
P8	-	-	-	-	-
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4 Distribution of the Respondents by Family Income and English Language Grade (SPM)

Grade	Income (RM)				
	<400.00	401-800	801-1200	1201-1600	>1600
A1	4%	2%	16%	23%	44%
A2	4%	4%	10%	-	9%
C3	22%	24%	17%	31%	20%
C4	33%	27%	17%	27%	8%
C5	11%	26%	26%	19%	9%
C6	19%	9%	2%	-	6%
P7	7%	6%	12%	-	4%
P8	-	2%	-	-	-
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Peer influence was noted as a school-linked factor where most of the students (89%) observed that their friends read in English and Malay. It was also unveiled that 73% of them were encouraged by their friends to read materials in Malay while 68% of the students were encouraged by their friends to read materials in English.

It was also discovered that 86% of the students who read widely in English did so because they were encouraged by their English language teachers.

When asked about reading for pleasure, 38% of students recorded that they read materials in Malay for pleasure while 23% stated that they read materials in English for pleasure. Twelve percent (12%) of the students read in both Malay and English for leisure purposes.

This study has also noted that teachers play an important role in fostering reading habits. The teacher, as observed by Gambrell, (1996:14) forms an explicit reading model where s/he can create opportunities for students to become familiar with lots of books. It was revealed in this study that 36% of the students read for pleasure because they were hearted by the reading habits of their teachers. Interestingly, 36% of students said that their tendency to read in Malay was influenced by their teachers' reading habits and 50% of the students commented that their tendency to read in English was linked to their teachers reading English materials.

Reading Materials

The study also attempted to look into the types of materials read by the students and it was found that 74% of them were reading textbooks in Malay everyday while only 21% of the students were reading textbooks

in English everyday. It can be said that the students read more in Malay because the medium of instruction was in Malay and the books used were mainly in Malay. This finding is consistent with the recent study on the reading habits among Malaysians conducted by the National Library which suggest that Malaysians aged 25 and below read a lot to pass examinations, something which is common in examination-oriented countries. It can also be implied here students read more as they progress to higher schooling levels but discontinue reading for leisure after they reach the age of 25.

In this study, 37% of the students said that they like to read in Malay while in primary school and this figure increases to 40% while in secondary schools. However, the same cannot be said for reading in English. Sixty-eight percent (68%) stated that they liked to read in English in primary schools and this percentage drops to 50% while in secondary schools.

One possible explanation for this finding is that students see the need to read in Malay to improve their language. Students who read in English may have read at home and continued to read in school but realised that the Malay language is more significant for learning purposes. These findings are consistent with the explanation given earlier.

In terms of reading a variety of materials, it was found that 23% of the students read Malay fiction everyday, 53% read Malay newspapers each day and 66% read Malay magazines.

As far as reading in English is concerned, 17% marked that they read books in English daily, 23% read English dailies while 31% read magazines.

It is said that the media impinges upon readership behaviour. In this study it was noted that 74% of the students watch Malay television programmes during their leisure time while 94% of them listen to Malay radio programmes in the leisure time. Further, 62% of the students watched English television programmes while 74% of them listen to English radio programmes in the leisure time. Given the high exposure to the mass media, it can be stressed (as it will be done in the next section) that the mass media can be used as tools for promoting reading. It is also suggested here that the watching television and listening to radio can be seen as supplementary reading texts that can enrich the students cultural experience.

We cannot ignore the implications of developments in the area of communication and information technology, particularly given the emphasis accorded to these forms in the task of the nation's educational transformation. The study was interested in finding the impact of computers on reading. There were 36% students who said that they knew how to use the computer and 54% of them claimed that the computer has affected their reading for pleasure. In addition, 51% stated that they preferred to read print materials than reading computer texts.

The statistics above confirm for us much of what we already believed: both books as well as computers are used as texts for making information and meaning. In other words, computers are not likely to replace books –what is important is for schools to create opportunities and skills for interpreting and making sense of visual representation.

Conclusion

Given that the area of literacy is currently under much public attention in the Malaysian society, it is necessary to create awareness and

understanding on the importance of lifelong reading so that more research and action strategies essential for the social and intellectual development of students is taken.

It needs to be emphasised that the home setting can provide a literacy-rich environment where parents and sibling play integral roles by being reading models. Reading related activities at home or with the living community can be arranged to induce reading as fun and as lifelong learning.

If students come from homes that are not able to create a conducive environment for reading, then this experience has to be available in schools where administrators, teachers and school-related organisations can contribute to the cultivation of lifelong reading. In the era of information technology, new approaches to teaching and learning of reading skills must be considered. We should move towards a broad approach to reading so as to incorporate visual, oral and written codes and texts. It is also most pressing that students be given the necessary skills to understand critically the ways these texts operate, the meanings they produce and the ways we make sense of them.

In this connection, teacher-training institutions have a significant part to play by training teachers to be not only good reading models but also creating space in the curriculum to incorporate numerous forms of reading texts. Put differently, it makes good sense to talk of reading 'television' or reading 'computers'. Allied to this is a conception of students who will be active as well, creating and using meanings in their own cultural experiences for self and social betterment.

The education system should also be reassessed so as not focus primarily on school-work and passing examinations. Examinations

have to be decentralised and reading for information and pleasure should have a role in the assessment of students' academic performance. Life-long knowledge and skills should also be provided to students in schools so that they are able to make sense of the new emerging reading texts in a more critical and creative manner.

The structures and value systems of society have also to be re-visioned to ensure that reading, especially for knowledge and leisure becomes a core component of our cultural landscape. It is inadequate for only one site to embark on inculcating active reading in isolation when the formation of reading is closely interconnected with a range of factors such as social values of their society, school, family and environment. Clearly it is imperative that different institutions and interest-groups as well as corporate sectors in each society share a common responsibility for preparing young knowledgeable people for tomorrow and play a more active role in promoting lifelong reading.

It is pertinent, by way of conclusion, to reiterate that it is the agents and structures in a nation that are in place today that will set the forms of readership behaviour for tomorrow. It is evident that the task of creating a generation of active readers in both languages is an uphill task but nevertheless it is a fundamental one that can work towards the betterment of society.

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