THE EFFECTS OF LINEAR AND NON-LINEAR TEXT ON STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN READING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation is to identify the differences in their performance when the students read 'linear' and 'non-linear' as shown by the test, and at the same time, to identify which of the two texts interests students most. The respondents were primarily Semester One students of UiTM City Campus, Johor Bahru branch and at present, taking BEL 120 subject; Consolidating Language Skill. Along the process of answering the research questions of this investigation, the instruments used were Test 1 ('linear'), Test 2 ('non-linear'), a set of survey questions and a number of interview questions. The findings suggested that most respondents scored better in 'non-linear' questions (Test 2) as compared to 'linear' questions (Test 1). Generally, based on the respondents' feedbacks of the questionnaires, they favored 'non-linear' texts to linear texts. Referring to the respondents' responses during the interview sessions, four out of six respondents had chosen 'non-linear' text because of the same reason simultaneously. The rationale was that the primary idea of 'non-linear' text could be easily understood and tackled in a short period of time.

ABSTRAK

Kajian terhadap pelajar dalam mengenalpasti pembacaan teks linear dan teks bukan linear bertujuan untuk melihat perbezaan prestasi mereka, dalam masa yang sama untuk melihat kecenderungan pelajar memilih teks. Seramai 30 orang pelajar dari UiTM Kampus Bandaraya, Johor Bahru, yang terdiri dari pelajar Semester 1 mengambil subjek BEL 120 ("*Consolidating Language Skill*"). Sepanjang proses menjawab soalan kaji selidik, instrument yang digunakan ialah Ujian 1 (linear) dan Ujian 2 (bukan linear). Analisis kajian mendapati pelajar lebih cenderung menjawab soalan-soalan berdasarkan teks bukan linear. Rujukan melalui maklum balas responden menyatakan mereka lebih gemar memilih teks bukan linear kerana ia lebih mudah difahami dan diselesaikan dalam jangka masa pendek.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

It is difficult to imagine a world without books and other kinds of reading material. If it had not been for Johann Gutenberg's invention of the movable letters for printing, we would not be able to enjoy such a wide array of reading materials today. It has been said that reading is exercise for the mind. This is because reading provides more input and stimulates the mind. Reading also improves a person's command of a language.

Hence, this project will concentrate on performance of students when reading linear and non-linear texts. The respondents for this project will be part 1 students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) City Campus, Johor Bahru taking BEL120 subject named Consolidating Language Skills. The syllabus for this subject caters for reading skills that students are supposed to learn and this is one of the reasons to conduct this project which may be helpful for future purpose and also academicians, especially those who are teaching second language learners.

1.2   Background of the Study

This project concentrates on an investigation of the effects of text selection on students' reading performance particularly in English as a Second language (ESL) context. This area is chosen to be explored as it is hoped that the results found may be helpful for future researchers and also academicians who are teaching Second Language learners. In addition to that, research in this area is important in discovering the effective mode to ensure teaching and learning reading takes place effectively.

It is realized that reading habits tend to decline gradually and this has negative implications for youngsters and learners from school level. What factors hinder the learners' effective reading habits and what factors contribute to success?

Other than the lack of interest in reading, poor reading habits and negative attitudes towards reading, the success and failure of reading performance are affected by text selection. Hence, styles of teaching reading need to be modified to ensure effectiveness takes place. This is because sometimes learners tend to frown upon reading; presumably their teachers teaching in school do not change the traditional type of reading activities or texts. Therefore learners are equipped with the same boring techniques, or presented with the same monotonous style of reading passage and activities extracted from text books that are normally done in the Malaysian classrooms. This only implies that reading texts may play an important role in influencing students' performance in reading.

In fact, the importance of reading is always highlighted in the speeches of politicians and educationalist in Malaysia. Reading days or weeks, reading competitions and mini libraries are introduced into every Malaysian classroom to attract interest among learners. Moreover, reading ability is often taken as a measure of a learner's maturity and intellectual development. The worst part is under achievement in reading in the early years. This is seen as a hindrance to learners. Those who do not read English books are sometimes rated by their teachers as being poor in reading.

In relation to this, this project is carried out with the intention to seek answers to how big is the influence of text selection on reading performance among university students in Malaysia. Specifically, this study will suggest if linear or non-linear texts are more suitable to be used in reading lesson for university students. With this, it is intended that some solutions in overcoming doubt that some teachers are facing in selecting the best reading text to give to students may be recommended.

In fact, interesting reading text should become the basic text in the classroom teaching and list of activities of what teachers ought to do in the midst of helping learners to make reading extensively for pleasure and academic purpose (Bowen, & Marks, 1994).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The key to successful reading activities is proper comprehension of the texts. However, the common situation in reading activities is learners' inability to comprehend the texts appropriately. While this is obviously a problem to first language users, the same situation happening in ESL context. Logically, when reading the materials in learners' first language is already a problem, the predicament doubles when readers process materials in their second or subsequent language.

The catalysts to this problem are many but one of them is text selection. As mentioned before, reading texts are generally categorized as linear and non-linear. While the linearity of linear texts makes it rigid, linear texts provide beneficial structural cues that help students with comprehension (Foltz, 1996; Charney, 1987). As for non-linear texts, these structural cues are absent but Ain Nadzimah and Chan (2006) suggested that by processing non-linear texts, students also develop skills to construct meaning through information transfer and scanning for specific information.

Therefore, the question arises as to how reading texts, linear and non-linear, affect ESL students' performance in reading. As far as this study is concerned, the scope is narrowed down to first year university students in Malaysia.

1.3.1   Problems of reading as a second language

It is quite common to find confused learners who are not able to extract the contextual meaning from the text effectively due to the lack of background knowledge and experience. This could be due to lack of priority given to the learners. Most teachers in Malaysian schools follow the syllabus strictly thus neglecting the learners' need to concentrate on the sentence and understand every word in the reading text. Results showed that "… in their mother tongue they were generally regular readers, although certain constraints such as time means that some of them were not regular readers for pleasure" (Grenfell, M.1995:17). Thus learners probably consider reading in a second language as stressful rather than pleasurable (Grenfell, M. 1995:1).

At the same time, some teachers for instance in Malaysia still practice conventional methods like the grammar-translation method in reading. This approach concentrates on memorizing vocabulary, learning grammatical rules and translation as a means of assessing reading competence. The lesson is more teacher-centered which can cause frustration and boredom to the learners; moreover the learners tend to use the dictionary. Therefore, it is difficult for learners to acquire the competence through the relationship builds with books. Grenfell, (1995:2) stated,

"With real books children are expected to bring their own world views, emotion, experiences, etc. to the task of reading and to develop skills through the use of contexts and clues found in the text."

This means that if the students are able to understand the text well, they are able to comprehend and also engage in reading as they understand the meaning of the text. In fact, if the readers are able to understand the text fully without difficulty, they will be able to bring in their own opinion or perceptions concerning the text they have read earlier with ease.

Goodman (1967) also regarded reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" which encourages the reader to be active and purposeful. In the Malaysian Secondary Integrated Curriculum, "more topics are also introduced to provide students with a more sophisticated and broader context in which to develop and apply their skills." In an effort to motivate the learners, literary materials such as short stories, poems, authentic materials from newspaper, magazine, brochures, and pictorial stimulus are provided during the lessons in the classroom. These enrich learner's competency and helps to develop an interest in reading.

Furthermore, authentic materials used as reading materials can also create problems to second language learners because of the lack of background knowledge. Therefore learners may take time to understand the text, for example to read a menu, brochure, leaflet, advertisement, etc. These points show that unfamiliar reading materials can also demotivate learners. Hence, schema theory and background knowledge also plays a role in ensuring students understanding in reading. As being quoted by Brown (2000, p.299), he said that "the reader brings information, knowledge, emotion, experience, and culture-that is schemata (plural) – to the printed world. This means that readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories as skills in reading depends on the efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world.

On the other hand, problems can arise between the learner's knowledge of phonics required in learning to read and the role of grammar in reading a second language as interference of mother tongue can become an obstacle to understand the text. With this, teachers need to take a high degree of caution in choosing a reading text given to students to ensure effective teaching and learning takes place.

At this point, this topic, which views problems of reading as a second language, is appropriate to inform learners of the excitement to be had from reading and not to scare them as they should have motivation in reading a text.

1.3.2 Problems with Linear and Non-Linear Texts

As stated before, reading texts can be divided into two types namely linear and non-linear texts. The debate of potential benefits and hazards of using these texts has been ongoing. Nevertheless, it is still interesting to discover the limitations of using non-linear texts and linear texts.

The main problem of using non-linear texts is the issue of coherence in reading. Since non-linear texts do not "transport" readers in a one-way journey, finding coherence in reading non-linear texts is more difficult especially for second language readers. In his paper, Kymes (2007) opined that non-linear presentation of texts is short of coherence which results in difficulties to integrate old information and new knowledge. Other than that, non-linear texts lack discourse cues which are abundant in traditional texts (Charney, 1987). These discourse cues are needed to guide readers to move from one part of the text to the next part while maintaining coherence in reading.

Since non-linear texts are more reader-driven than author-driven, ambiguity intolerant readers are at disadvantage. While autonomous readers may enjoy the pleasure of controlling their own "journey" through the text, not conforming to the path that the author want them to follow, other readers may not appreciate the flexibility since this type of readers need an arrangement to depend on. As stated by Charney (1987), given the greater control of processing the text, readers are posed with greater burdens because they "…must now locate the information they need and relate it to other facts in the network, often without the aid of traditional structural cues." Furthermore, readers who are ambiguity intolerant might be used to the

traditional text that requires readers to read from front to back (Church, 2001) and therefore, when this linearity is taken away, they face difficulty to even start reading. Church also adds that "This is a big change in the way people are accustomed to receiving written information and, as is often the case, change brings with it apprehension." Therefore, non-linear texts may be a difficulty to ambiguity intolerant readers.

Moving on, the many limitations of non-linear texts do not imply that linear texts are more superior or flawless. Similar to non-linear texts, linear texts have some limitations as well.

For one thing, linear texts can be monotonous reading and lack appeal to second language readers. Linear texts are directed to "one-line" movement from front to back which may call for monotonous process. The absence of audio-visual inputs only adds to the dreariness of reading linear texts like long articles, journals and textbooks. Dehlin (2002) agrees with this as she implies that linear texts do not come with a package containing "…a varied diet of sights, sounds and links…" In addition, Guthrie and Wang (2004) lists several components of intrinsic motivation that include enjoyment of engaging in appealing texts. Therefore, with the exclusion of narrative linear texts (narratives for university students are hardly supplemented with graphics), when readers do not find excitement in reading texts that are dry, long and without the accompaniment of visual graphics, linear texts immediately become "unappetizing" pieces.

Another limitation for linear texts is that they can also be difficult to comprehend. It is discussed above that non-linear texts may be a hindrance to reading comprehension because of coherence issues. Meanwhile, linear texts are packed with structural cues and hence, coherence is almost not an issue. However, in certain conditions, linear texts can still be difficult to "digest" especially when readers are facing a "one-way" text in which they are not familiar with its context. In his article, Foltz (1996) states that "As in linear text, readers with background knowledge on the domain of the text will be better at encoding information from the text than those without the background knowledge." It is easy to see then, when reading moves in one line without dropping by to seek clarifications from visual aids and schemata of related context is missing, the text easily becomes indigestible.

Having discussed the possible limitations of both types of texts, it is obvious that non-linear texts have more shortcomings than linear texts. However, this is not saying that the latter is more beneficial than the former. Instead, this is just showing which areas that language teachers should improve on because as explored in the previous sections, both linear and non-linear texts can be powerful materials for reading comprehension when prepared appropriately.

1.4   Purpose and Objectives of the study

The objectives of this project concern the reasons why learners fail to achieve an acceptable level of reading competency and understand the meanings of language. The problem does not happen only in Malaysia but is also experienced by all whenever a foreign or second language is taught. In relation to this, the factor that contributes to the success of effective reading (text selection in particular) and issues related to it are studied.

It is noted that only a small proportion of learners going through the high school and university achieves competence to be able to use reading skills meaningfully and because of this, the problems of reading is to be studied

Therefore, this study sets out the following objectives to be reach;
1.   To identify if there is a difference in performance when students read linear and non-linear texts as shown by the tests.
2.   To identify which of the two texts interests students the most.

1.5   Research Questions

There are several factors to study and the objectives were to get data relating to reading skills. The following questions will be addressed:-

1. Is there a difference in performance when students read linear and non-linear texts as shown by the test?
2. Which of the two texts interests students the most?

1.6   Significance of the study

Learners should acquire reading skills as reading is the best way to acquire knowledge and information, besides being a form of entertainment. It is commonly known that reading helps to enrich and improve a person's language (Wallace, 2006). It is due to the fact where certain words are seldom used in spoken language but which occur more often in writing. A person who reads comes across many words and different sentence structures; thus increases his vocabulary and improves grammar. Despite these benefits, Malaysian students particularly still lack when it comes to reading comprehension.

Poor ability in reading comprehension is undeniably a hindrance for ESL students in Malaysia, especially when they begin tertiary education. Since Malaysia is one of the Outer Circle countries (Bolton, 2008), English is used extensively in many domains including education; hence, it is crucial for university students to develop the ability of analyzing and interpreting texts. This skill is fundamental since university students need to process abundant resources and materials which are mostly in the form of texts, for their learning. Therefore, poor reading comprehension is worrisome as far as university students are concerned.

In Malaysia, English is studied as a second language that requires learners to be able to read and speak fluently especially in real-life situations. However many Malaysians find difficulty to read fluently and quickly in English. Therefore the aim of this project is to examine the influence of texts in reading English.

Hopefully this project will provide teachers with a clearer picture of the learners' desire in reading and ways to optimize the learners' performance and broaden their knowledge by expanding, extending and enriching their reading experiences by using suitable texts for the students.

Moreover, it is hoped that this project will enable teachers of reading to help their learners to improve the reading comprehension skills.

1.7   Limitations of the study

1.6.1   Time

The research has to be completed within a semester, which is insufficient time to really explore the area in depth.

1.6.2   Materials

There are many materials which can be found outside but the materials used for this research may not cater all level of proficiency.

1.6.3   Students Samples

A small sample of students was selected to be used for this research thus making the information obtained may not be generalized to all the students in Malaysia.

1.6.4   Questionnaire & Interview

There is a possibility that the students did not answer the questionnaire & interview honestly as some of them might have tried to impress the researcher by giving answers that were expected from them.

1.8   Definition of Terms

Reading

Reading is defined as a process in which readers respond to the text to form meaningful discourse through a complex information processing channel (Nieh, n.d.)

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the reconstruction of knowledge through dynamic and attentive reading procedures that direct readers to critically interpret and analyze the passage (Abdul Rashid Mohammed, Chan, J. & Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan, 2006)

Linear Text

This is described as traditional text type that has a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph, is followed by several supporting sentences which serve as further elaboration to the topic sentence (Church (2001)

Non-Linear Text

This type of text is the opposite of linear text in which it allows readers to control their own movement, not necessarily using front-to-back movement and text is normally accompanied by graphic-visual representation (Charney, 1987; Ain Nadzimah Abdullah & Chan. S. H., 2006).