
ESL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS LEISURE READING

1.Francine Joseph

Astro Radio SdnBhd, Malaysia

Joseph.francine@gmail.com

2.Nafiseh Zarei

Faculty of Education and Humanities, Unitar International University, Malaysia

nafiseh@unitar.my

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to explore the students' perceptions towards leisure reading in English Language. This study employed a qualitative method using two research instruments; open-ended questionnaire and focus group discussion to collect data among 29 secondary school students from a local government school in Malaysia. The results of this study demonstrated that the students had positive thoughts towards leisure reading, and they perceived it as an important habit for their future growth. In addition, the results of this study revealed that leisure reading opens the door to creativity in writing skills.

Keywords: ESL, reading habit, leisure reading, perception, social learning theory

Introduction

Reading is a gateway to gain better knowledge of a topic or a situation that broadens one's mind to gain deeper understanding and create judgements and beliefs. It extends curiosity and experiences that builds character, attitude, moral values, judgements, beliefs, fluency of the language, and actions of readers. In other words, reading is an effective process that exercises the mind to think

consciously by learning the influences of the information. It is regarded as one of the most important habits which essentially provides lifelong learning for all learners. Bashir &Mattoo (2012) believed that students should inculcate a good reading habit in order to excel in life.

Reading material resources usually come in the form of comics, magazines, and newspapers. However, with the help of technology, e-books can be read on desktop computers, laptops, electronic tablets, and smart phones. There are many helpful reading applications such as Goodreads, Aldiko book reader, Amazon Kindle, Bookari, and Google Play Books which include thousands of e-books to read for free in the present era of the information and knowledge revolution.

Alter(2014) stated that in terms of gender, females tend to read more than males. Palani (2012) found that having interest in reading is the most important skill which creates a literate society and it shapes a child's thinking to create new ideas. He believes that the significance of reading is interrelated to education and successful education requires successful reading. It is obvious that reading expands vocabulary, opens the door to imagination,

and the ability to succeed academically. This view was supported by Krashen (1982), who stated that readers develop their writing skills using different vocabulary and advance grammar through reading. Moreover, reading enhances language proficiency and makes the reader to be more confident while speaking.

Literature Review

Krashen (1982) mentioned that the definition of leisure reading is comprehensible as it depends on the reader's willingness to find material at his level and reject materials that are beyond his interest or understanding. To have an optimum input requirement, reading must be interesting and relevant to the reader to ignite the passion beyond him. In leisure reading, readers have the option of skipping the sections which are too difficult or less interesting. They even have the option of putting back the storybook in the shelf after reading a few pages. They can skip words, they do not understand, and they have the option of looking up the words in the dictionary or Google. The main idea is that books should be easy to understand, and topics should be genuinely interesting so that students would read them.

A study by Fletcher & Nicholas (2016) showed that teenagers are interested in reading as they perceived it to be important for their future and career growth. Their study examined the teenagers' perceptions on their learning abilities in order to find out the factors that motivate them to read. They concluded that students valued teachers who used reading strategies in the class in order to develop students' vocabulary. In addition,

students preferred to work in groups to discuss the topics being taught with peers. In fact, in many cases, students want to be treated with respect and not to be put in a tough position as they are very conscious of what their peers think about them. Therefore, students tend to perceive effective strategies from teacher's behavior and attitude in teaching and learning. McGeown, Goodwin, Henderson, & Wright (2012) suggested that learning should involve speaking activities such as debates, role play, and discussions. Teachers promote these activities for the benefits of learners that are part of learning language fluency which provides them ability to converse, write, and read. These learning strategies magnify learner's interest and classroom participation.

Merriam & Bierema (2013) stated that teenagers must be deeply interested in what they read. Normally most of them respond well if the reading styles involve critical thinking or real-time situations. Teenagers enjoy reading widely from a variety of sources other than books. In the emerging world of technology, teenagers are growing to become digital savvy young people. "There is little doubt that technology infuses lives of today's learners as it is shaping not only the context of learning but the learning itself (Parker, 2013, P 54)." Even most of the lower secondary schools in Malaysia have adopted teaching and learning via technology and many teachers are well-equipped and rapidly progressing towards 21st century skills. Both teachers and students are exposed to Android and Apple via cloud computing concepts. Teachers create online assignments gaining

immediate feedback out of school grounds. In terms of reading, students develop the ability to access, digest, and evaluate information that is at their fingertips before re-constructing them to fit the task given. Ultimately, students will acquire Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) since they need to be critical in selecting the most appropriate contents that fit their class tasks and assignments.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) was selected for this study since it enables readers to play a role in learning and observing their peers to keep up their academic preparations, aspirations, and cognitive developments. Generally, children are excellent observers and they are surrounded by many influential models such as parents, teachers, and peers. SLT is often described as a bridge between behavior learning and cognitive learning (Bandura 1977). The learner must pay attention to the model then observe and remember the behavior. On the other hand, Bandura's theory demonstrated that people learn through observation and imitating human's behaviors which will lead to change understanding and thinking behaviors.

Reading involves some learning skills such as learning pronunciation and learning new words effectively. Students should acquire and develop these skills in the real world where English is widely used. With the correlation between reading and learning, learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) tend to learn when they have a strength in reading (Bharuthram, 2012). Reading is to understand thoughts; either someone else's

thoughts or our thoughts in the past. Reading is an important way in which we gain knowledge about the world. Students must read to improve their knowledge and understanding. According to Van Baalen, Blom, and Hollander, (2012), reading is not primarily a process of picking up information from a page, letter-by-letter, or word-by-word but good readers use knowledge to predict information, sampling the text, and then confirming the prediction. The strategic active reading is being taught at ESL schools which is known as "scanning and skimming" of the text. However, researchers have found that Malaysian students are often proficient readers in their first language, but they are not good readers in their second language which is English.

Method

The research design of this study was qualitative. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a detailed source of information to explore the understanding problems of each individual. One identifier of a qualitative method is to explore and understand the problem researched from the participant's perspective. The sample of this study was comprised of 29 ESL Malaysian secondary students from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan school. Most of the students were from middle-class families and they were Malaysian Chinese. The sampling technique for this study was purposive sampling that is a non-probability sampling technique. This technique was selected because it gives space for the research to rely on conscious selection for choosing members to participate in the study. Alternatively,

purposive sampling technique helps the researchers to understand the problem and the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

In this study, an in-depth open-ended questionnaire and focus group discussions were used to portray clarifying and deciphering gathered data constructively. The open-ended questionnaire consisted of 13 questions. The purpose of the open-ended questionnaire was to determine the students' perceptions towards leisure reading. The researchers distributed the open-ended questionnaires to the students in the classrooms. Sufficient time was given to the them to answer the questions appropriately. The focus group discussion was conducted with all students. At the beginning of the discussion, the researchers provided a pattern of introducing the group discussion with a welcome note, an overview of the topic, as well as the ground rules. The students' responses were recorded using a mobile phone and were transcribed by the researchers afterwards. The students shared their experiences and thoughts in order to gather rich data for this study.

Findings and Discussion

The main objective of this study was to explore the students' perception towards leisure reading in English Language. This study also focused on the problems faced by the students regarding leisure reading in their daily lives. The findings of the study revealed three major aspects that caused Malaysian teenagers to read was to gain knowledge, to be smart and creative, and to learn a wide range of English vocabulary. Moreover, some

participants stated that they can enhance their academic performance through reading. According to the students' feedback, leisure reading opens the door to creativity in writing and to have a deeper understanding of one's successful journey. They claimed that leisure reading improves time management which leads to being patient. The overall findings of the study indicated that the teenage students had positive thoughts towards leisure reading, and they perceived it to be important for their future and career growth.

Based on the feedback from focus group discussion, most of the students mentioned that leisure reading improves people's imagination skill and it provides a deeper understanding of one's successful journey. They perceived that leisure reading is fun and it fills up their time. Three students mentioned that these were the reasons which encouraged them to read and to fill up their free time. Furthermore, some students mentioned that they enjoy reading true stories as they make them motivated. (Merriam & Bierema 2013) teenagers must be deeply interested in what they read.

It is worth noting that the researchers asked the students to share their general thoughts on leisure reading. Most of the students claimed that reading is beneficial and prevents wasting time and it is a more useful activity as compared to other activities that can be done in their free time. However, two participants were de-motivated in terms of leisure reading, because they were more interested in involving other activities on their free time

as they did not have the patient to read. According to Wigfield, Gladstone and Turci (2016) children become less enthusiastic in reading when they grow older and resist engaging in reading as the school subjects are boring and difficult to understand. It is firmly identified that parents play an important role in their children's reading motivation and engagement. Stevens (2015) explored that many parents are actively involved in reading with their children.

Parents think that teenagers need less encouragement to sustain them in reading as they have been developed in that area. However, teenagers need parental guidance to develop leisure reading as well as to keep up with school activities. In this respect, they need consistent supervisions as they might struggle and move away from reading and keep up with school assignments. Therefore, it is obvious that they might be de-motivated in leisure reading due to heavy school tasks. Moreover, with the extended attention to the need to help teenagers to read, parents should perform routine activities such as reading newspapers, recipes, printed materials, e-books, and so forth, and so on in order to motivate their children. Merga (2014) stated that some parents lack involvement as they do not read for pleasure.

Bandura's theory was selected for this study because it enables readers to play roles in learning and observing their peers to keep up their academic preparation, aspirations, and cognitive development. Bandura claimed that in terms of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental

factors of human behaviors, teenagers are exposed to acceptable and unacceptable behaviors within a circle of people which includes family, neighbors, school friends, and teachers.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated that the students had positive thoughts towards leisure reading, and they perceived it as an important habit for their future growth. In addition, the results of this study revealed that leisure reading opens the door to creativity in writing skills. In addition, the students stated that they can enhance their academic performance through reading related books as they can gain a lot of useful information and knowledge. Finally, leisure reading was effective in terms of students' time management skill.

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