

**STUDENTS' READING HABITS, LANGUAGE
PROFICIENCY AND LEARNING STYLE
PREFERENCES IN RELATION TO LITERARY
COMPETENCE**

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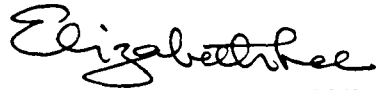
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to examine students' reading habits, language proficiency and perception of learning preferences in relation to literary competence. A sample size of one hundred and eighty one respondents was derived from two hundred and thirty six Form Four students in an urban secondary school in Sabah. A self-administered questionnaire was selected as a mode of data collection. All instruments used in the hypotheses testing were adaptations of previously developed instruments. Descriptive, Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient and Multiple Regression statistics were used to analyse the data with the aid of SPSS. Additional research instruments used were interviews conducted with teachers and students. The findings showed that there was a positive significant relationship between students' reading habits, language proficiency, learning style preferences and literary competence. However, language proficiency was found to be the salient predictor for literary competence. Additional findings also indicated that there was a mismatch of teaching style and learning style. This study concludes that students' language proficiency contributed significantly to the attainment of literary competence and therefore it should be given more emphasis in the teaching and learning of the literature component texts.

ABSTRAK

Tumpuan utama kajian ini dikendalikan dengan tujuan mengkaji perhubungan di antara tabiat membaca, kecekapan bahasa, gaya belajar dan kecekapan kesusasteraan di kalangan pelajar. Saiz sampel seramai seratus lapanpuluh satu responden dipilih secara rawak daripada dua ratus tigapuluh enam pelajar Tingkatan Empat di sebuah sekolah bandar yang terletak di bandaraya Kota Kinabalu. Soal-selidik secara urus-sendiri telah dipilih sebagai kaedah pengumpulan data. Kesemua alat ukur yang digunakan dalam pengujian hipotesis merupakan adaptasi daripada alat ukur yang telah dibentuk sebelumnya. Analisis korelasi dan regresi berganda telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data dengan bantuan SPSS. Selain daripada itu, alat ukur yang digunakan dalam kajian ini juga termasuk temuduga bersama pelajar dan guru. Keputusan korelasi menunjukkan bahawa terdapat perhubungan yang positif di antara tabiat membaca, kecekapan bahasa, gaya belajar dan kecekapan kesusasteraan di kalangan pelajar. Namun, kecekapan bahasa merupakan pembolehubah tidak bersandar yang dapat meramalkan tahap kecekapan kesusasteraan pelajar dengan baik. Keputusan dari alat ukur lain menunjukkan bahawa gaya mengajar dan gaya belajar pelajar adalah tidak selari. Kesimpulan dari kajian ini ialah kecekapan bahasa pelajar seharusnya diberi penekanan apabila guru mengajar teks komponen sastera.

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PTS	Penilaian Tahap Sekolah	2
KBSR	Integrated Primary School Curriculum <i>(Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah)</i>	2
KBSM	Integrated Secondary School Curriculum <i>(Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah)</i>	2
UPSR	Primary School Achievement Test <i>(Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah)</i>	2
MUET	Malaysian Universities English Test	3
SPM	Malaysia Certificate of Education <i>(Sijil Pelajaran Menengah)</i>	4
STPM	Malaysian Higher School Certificate Education <i>(Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia)</i>	4
NILAM	Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca	10
ESL	English as a Second Language	11
PMR	Lower Secondary Evaluation <i>(Penilaian Menengah Rendah)</i>	18
PS	Play Station	19
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language	26
IELTS	International English Language Testing System	26
SANZAC	Sabah, Australian, New Zealand Army Corps	49
MOE	Ministry of Education	52
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences	59

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**"If children do not learn the way we teach them,
then we must teach them the way they learn".**

-Rita Dunn-

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It has been quoted fairly often that 'teaching' is not a 'job' but a 'vocation'. It is a 'calling' or a strong sense of duty to the purpose of not only imparting knowledge to students but to positively influence and prepare them to take their place in and contribute to society. Sometimes in the field of teaching there might be one "right" way to teach students a theory or to understand a particular concept. Usually this "right" way reaches some students and not others, and teachers find themselves frustrated in their attempts to provide the best environment for all students. The 'million dollar question' is how to provide the best teaching and learning experience for all students so that all may achieve the desired goal of becoming useful citizens who can contribute positively towards nation building? It may be a question that will never be answered adequately because in the final analysis, there are many variable factors to consider as there will never be one, single, ultimate effective language teaching which responds appropriately to what we want the learners to learn or acquire. This is because every learner is unique and every teacher is unique and every learner-teacher relationship is unique (Brown, 1994:15).

The importance of the learner, the teacher and their relationship can never be brushed aside and this is clearly evident in the days of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle where the 'teacher-student' relationship is hierarchical. The recognition of success in a student was solely based on the teachings of the teacher. History has proven that Plato was the prized student of Socrates and subsequently Aristotle was perceived as the great student of Plato. It was the same in China, during the Han dynasty, where Confucius was considered the great Chinese Educator whose famous students included Zai Wo, Zi Gong, Ran You and Zi Lu. All four great men; Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Confucius were indeed great teachers however they have had the advantage of teaching only a few students at a time. Since then, more than two thousand years has passed and education around the world has gone through countless reformation with different types of approaches to learning such as behaviourism, cognitivism and humanism. It has changed the way we perceived how the learner learns, and the teacher teaches.

Likewise, education in Malaysia has gone through some changes over the past decade or so. First, there was the introduction of the Integrated Primary/Secondary School Curriculum (KBSR and KBSM) – a revised, student-oriented curriculum that aimed to cut out too much chalk and talk. Education was to be for and in the total interests of the wholesome development of the child. Next there were new examinations introduced (the PTS, for example), others enhanced (the introduction of Science in the UPSR). Recently, there was the introduction of information technology and multimedia into the education curriculum via the 'smart schools' concept where all teachers had to adjust themselves in using the computer. Throughout these changes, the role of English can be figuratively speaking, evolved from being the 'bride' to the 'bridesmaid' and to later on to re-emerge as the 'bride' once again. During the colonial period, English was the language of government, administration and commerce. Understandably, English was the 'bride' because it was crucial to one's career development and social mobility (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992). After independence, English was demoted to the place of the 'bridesmaid' because Bahasa Melayu replaced

English as the language of administration and of education. This continued for a number of decades until English was finally phased out as a medium of instruction in all public schools (1970s) and institutions of higher education (1980s). Finally, English re-emerge as a 'bride' when the Malaysian Cabinet publicly announced that Mathematics and Science subjects would be taught in English as of 2003.

Today, English is a compulsory second language in primary and secondary schools. In addition, with the introduction of the Malaysian Universities English Test (MUET) in 2001 and literature as a tested component in the Malaysian secondary school ESL syllabus in 2000, English has been resurrected and re-established to its proper place.

It is not the scope of this study to debate on the educational policy changes or the impact of these policies towards the nation as a whole. Rather, this paper hopes to give a brief outline on the rationale behind the introduction of the literature component in the English Language Syllabus and to examine the relationship between students' reading habits, language proficiency and learning style preferences in relation to literary competence.

1.1.1 Background of Research

The aim of the literature component is to enhance students' proficiency in English language through the study of prescribed literary texts (Appendix A), contribute to personal development and character building, and broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world views. The main teaching-learning areas of focus of the literature component in the English language Curriculum for secondary schools is that it intends to use literature as a resource or better known as the study of literature with a small 'l' as oppose to big 'L' which would mean literature as a study. However, a closer look at the learning outcomes shows that the component also has elements of literature as a study in it. For example some of the learning outcomes such as "discuss plot, character, setting and author's point of view" and "compare and

contrast characters" are clearly slanted towards the study of literature. From here, it may be concluded that the literature component is a combination of big 'L' and small 'l' and it would be quite appropriate to infer that students must achieve literary competence so as to be able to comprehend, analyse, apply, appreciate and most importantly answer literature questions which are being tested as part of the English language paper in the Malaysian public examination SPM.

Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that students are reading literature for information purposes which Rosenblatt (1986) as cited by Nuttal (1996) pointed out as "reading efferently". An example of efferent reading is reading a set of instructions in a manual or on the back of a medicine bottle. The reader is reading to gain meaning to take away from the reading. In short, the reader is reading so as to acquire information which may help him/her fulfill certain objectives and in the Malaysian education context, this would mean to pass an examination. From the discussion above, it would seem that a contradiction exist in the literature component syllabus where it aims to promote aesthetic and not efferent reading.

In her study, Chang Hsiu-Sui (2003) discovered that instructors of literature seldom consider it their task to develop their students' target language proficiency. A similar approach is also being prescribed by the teachers teaching the literature component texts in the Malaysian classrooms. Assumptions that students' language proficiency will naturally improve for the better with the learning of the literature component texts. On the contrary, results in their English language papers in SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education or its equivalent O-Levels) and MUET in STPM (Malaysian Higher School Certificate Education or its equivalent A-Levels) state otherwise. Though English is taught as a second language in Malaysia, the level of proficiency in the language is still at a dismal state (Asmah Haji Omar, 1982).

According to Chang Hsiu-Sui (2003:216), "English proficiency affected not only the reading of literary texts but also writing about them. Even when they understood something in the text, some of the students reported having difficulty in writing.

English language proficiency interfered and negatively affected students' performance in literature courses as shown in what they wrote. Lack of proficiency caused both language and thinking problems in writing". Correspondingly, Malaysian students are facing similar problems and their lack of understanding of and response to the literature component texts is not surprising. This statement concurs with scholarly discussions by Gilroy-Scott, 1983; Zughoul, 1985; Arens & Swaffar, 1987), lack foreign literacy (Mujica, 1997), and lack literary understanding ability (e.g. Bernhardt, 1990; Bader, 1992; Mujica, 1997; Davis, Girell, Kline & Hsieh 1992).

In trying to elevate students' language proficiency, one of the many aspects that should be taken into consideration is students' preferred learning styles. The varied learning styles identified by eminent educators and psychologists are indeed long. For example, Ausubel (1968:171) as cited by Brown (1994) identified at least 18 different styles. Hill (1972) defined some 29 different factors that make up the cognitive-style "map" of a learner; these include just about every imaginable sensory, communicative, cultural, affective, cognitive, and intellectual factor. Dunn, Beaudry & Klavas (1989), Trayer (1991), Hartnett (1985) and Brown (1973) reviewed a number of styles relating to the teaching-learning process in general and specifically to second language learning. In the interest of brevity, this study only focuses on the learning styles or perceptual learning channels identified by Dunn & Dunn (1979) as:

- a. Visual learning: reading, studying charts
- b. Auditory learning: listening to lectures, audiotapes
- c. Kinesthetic learning: experiential learning, that is, total physical involvement with a learning situation
- d. Tactile learning: "hands-on" learning, such as building models or doing laboratory experiments

The research findings of Dunn and Dunn (1979) found that only 20-30% of school age children appear to be auditory learners, that 40% are visual, and that the remaining 30-40% are tactile/kinesthetic, visual/tactile, or some other combination. Price, Dunn, & Sanders (1980) found that very young children are the most

tactile/kinesthetic, that there is a gradual development of visual strengths through the elementary grades, and that only in fifth or sixth grade can most youngsters learn and retain information through the auditory sense. Interestingly, Carbo (1983) as cited by Dunn & Dunn (1979), investigating the perceptual styles of readers, found that good readers prefer to learn through their visual and auditory senses, while poor readers have a stronger preference for tactile and kinesthetic learning.

It is hoped that this research will have been able to enlightened teachers, students, educators, and policy makers of the contributing variables that might lend their influence of students' attainment to literary competence. Although the final results cannot establish causation especially in different contexts but they might be used as a point of reference for further research to be conducted in the near future.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

During the fifteen years of teaching English in two urban schools in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, the researcher has found that the passing rate of the English Language Paper in major public examinations such as UPSR, PMR and SPM have been dismally low and more often than not below the national level. It seem incredulous that urban schools whose human resources, facilities and infrastructure are much better compared to rural or interior schools, cannot produce a large quantity of high achieving students. Moreover, English has been formally taught right from Primary 1 till Form 5 which means every secondary school student would have the minimum of 11 years of learning English before they leave school. Based on that, it may look like students have not acquired let alone mastered the proficiency of the language even though they have been exposed to the language from an early age and for a long period of time.

Majority of students in the urban schools that were taught by the researcher, do not like to read. Reading is still very much an alien culture for these students. For example, if any notices be it concerning curriculum or co-curriculum activities for the week, were to be written and put up on the notice board, majority of students would

have missed seeing and reading the announcements. Students still needed to be told during the assembly or over the P.A. system of these announcements. Two logical conclusions that could be formed here are; first, reading is not a priority and second, the majority of students are inclined towards auditory preferences where they understand orders if told rather than shown.

Besides this, literature, as with many other subjects, requires some reading on the part of the students. If students do not enjoy reading, it would be detrimental to their acquiring literary competence which subsequently will lead to poor results in the literature component section of their English Paper II. Not to be taken lightly, the twenty-five marks allocated for this section comprised a third of the total marks of English Paper II. Furthermore, the inclusion of the literature component (2000) in the language classroom has brought additional burden on the teachers whom the majority of them have never had any formal training or proper introduction to the teaching of literature. There is a common misconception that a 'teacher' is expected to know' how to teach and deliver her/his lessons well regardless if she/he has had any exposure to the subject being taught. It is not surprising to note that students' find literature lessons boring and uninteresting or even appallingly, the teacher is dull! Needless to say that students are going through the motions of treating literature as just another subject to be learnt and teachers are facing a similar situation in treating literature as just another subject to be taught. No doubt there have been many short courses conducted by key personnel both at federal and state level, but the main aim of these courses has been on pedagogical strategies. Due to the examination-oriented nature of the education system in Malaysia, students read their literature books not for aesthetical purposes but for answering and scoring in their exams. Consequently, their reading habits are formed purely for instrumental purposes and nothing more.

If teachers are able to marry' the idea of inculcating good reading habits, taking into account of students' language proficiency and matching students' learning style preference towards the teaching of literature, it would certainly help in making literature not only accessible but also enjoyable.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- (i) To examine the relationship between students' reading habits and literary competence.
- (ii) To examine the relationship between students' language proficiency and literary competence.
- (iii) To examine the relationship between students' learning style preferences and literary competence.
- (iv) To find out the best predictor for literary competence: Students' reading habits, language proficiency, or learning style preferences.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- (i) What are students' reading habits?
- (ii) What is the level of English language proficiency among students?
- (iii) What are the students' learning style preferences?
- (iv) What is the level of literary competence among students?
- (v) Is there a relationship between students' reading habits and literary competence?
- (vi) Is there a relationship between students' language proficiency and literary competence?
- (vii) Is there a relationship between students' learning style preferences and literary competence?

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