

# The Case of the (Non) Readers: An English Language Teacher's Perspective

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Studies carried out on the reading habits of Malaysians in 1984 and 1996 indicated that Malaysians only read two books per year. This is shocking as at this rate, Malaysians would find it difficult to achieve the national objective of 100% literacy by the year 2020. To motivate young Malaysians to read, the Ministry of Education has carried out various reading programmes, the latest of which is the NILAM programme. This paper is about how 8 Form One students who were unable to read or recognize words in English were taught to slowly achieve a minimum level of literacy. They were taken out from the mainstream NILAM programme which was carried out in SMK Tunku Abdul Rahman. To help this group of students achieve a minimum level of literacy, the phonics-based and top-down approaches were used. Apart from this, some translation also had to be done as the subjects could barely understand English. Naturally, skimming and scanning were also taught. Repetitions were the order of the day. The methodology applied was mainly observation and questionnaires. It was carried out over a period of about 8 months. The findings were encouraging even though success could be considered as minimal*

## INTRODUCTION

*If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us*

*Franz Kafka*

It can be seen from the quotation taken from Franz Kafka above that reading materials are powerful weapons that wrought changes in a person. Reading has been described as an adventure (Ray, 2004) and an active, two-way process of matching incoming data with our existing knowledge or schemata (Gajdusek, 1988). Gajdusek's views are in line with the new definition of reading given by NCREL, in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Reading,

University of Illinois (1991). Under the new definition of learning, the learner is an 'active, strategic reader, good strategy user and cognitive apprentice.' This is in contrast with the traditional view where the learner is described as 'passive, vessel receiving knowledge from external sources.'

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

In the 1980s, Malaysians only read two pages per year. The findings of a survey (with a sample population of 15, 054) that was carried out by academics from a range of Malaysian universities under the chairmanship of Professor Atan bin Long (1984:129) indicated that Malaysians only spend a mean monthly expenditure of M\$10.00 or below on books and magazines. In 1996, the findings are still dismal. This time, Malaysians only read two books per year. At this rate, Malaysians would find it difficult to achieve the national objective of 100% literacy by the year 2020.

The Ministry of Education has stressed on reading programmes in school ever since KBSM was implemented in 1989. When Circular number 5/1989 was circulated in schools, language teachers were asked to motivate students to read and inculcate in them the reading habit by using class readers. In 2000, the NILAM Programme was established with the same aim in mind, namely, to inculcate the reading habit among students. This year, the NILAM Programme has completed one circle.

In SMK Tunku Abdul Rahman, the NILAM Programme is carried out extensively with the Principal at the helm and the teachers as the crew. All students are expected to bring their own reading materials, either in English or in Malay, to the open space and to read these silently every Thursday from 700 – 750 in the morning. A few students are tested at the end of the silent reading by being called or volunteering to show how much they have read. They are asked to demonstrate their comprehension of what they have read by giving a synopsis of the story on stage. However, in the third week of January 2004, eight students from Form One were taken out from this mainstream group with the permission of the Principal.

## **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

I believe that if students are unable to read, then there is no point for them to be in the mainstream as this would be a waste of time on the part of the students. They would only continue not being able to read if no teacher is willing to help them. Therefore, it would be more beneficial for a teacher who is sincere about helping the students to identify students whom she considers as 'illiterates' or 'semi-illiterates,' These terms are only used to describe students who are unable to follow an English lesson in class or simple instructions given by an English teacher.

To ensure that I am not bias, I sent three students to be tested by the teacher in charge of the school's Intervention Programme after discovering that they could not follow a single word of what I was saying. These students were also unable to do the exercises set. The Intervention

Programme was in the Malay Language. However, it was still good to know whether the students are illiterate in both languages or only in English. Two were found to be illiterate in the Malay Language and one not at all. These three students would subsequently be termed as A, B and C. It was C that I was interested in as he appeared to be illiterate to me but his test score in the Malay Language was passable.

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In a study carried out by Cognitive Sciences (1991) on good and poor readers, the characteristics of poor/successful readers were as such:

**Table 1: Characteristics of Poor/Successful Readers**

<b>Characteristics of Poor Readers</b>	<b>Characteristics of Successful Readers</b>
Think understanding occurs from 'getting the words right,' rereading.	Understand that they must take responsibility for construction meaning using their prior knowledge.
Use strategies such as rote memorization, rehearsal, simple categorization.	Develop a repertoire of reading strategies, organizational patterns, and genre.
Are poor strategy users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They do not think strategically about how to read something or solve a problem</li> <li>• They do not have an accurate sense of when they have good comprehension readiness for assessment.</li> </ul>	Are good strategy users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They think strategically, plan, monitor their comprehension, and revise their strategies.</li> <li>• They have strategies for what to do when they do not know what to do.</li> </ul>
Have relatively low esteem.	Have self-confidence that they are effective learners; see themselves as agents able to actualize their potential.
See success and failure as the result of luck or teacher bias.	See success as the result of hard work and efficient thinking.

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that poor readers do use some strategies such as rote memorization, rehearsal and simple categorization. However, when I tried to apply these characteristics of poor readers to the eight students singled out by me, I was not sure whether the students make use of the same strategies as the poor readers or not. This was because they were even less than poor readers. They were UNABLE to read or recognize words in English. Moreover, they could not even utter a single word in the English Language initially.

In December 2003, I went to present a paper for the ETeMS Conference at Pearl International Hotel, Kuala Lumpur. At this conference, Dr. Sharifah Maimunah bt Syed Zin, the Director of Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education Malaysia, presented her paper on 'The Crucial Role of English in the Implementation of the "Teaching of Mathematics and Science in

English” Policy with Highlights on Support Programmes in English.’ During her plenary session, she touched on the fact that ‘our pupils today are the caretakers of the country tomorrow. Equipping them with the necessary skills, learning and attitudes is vital to ensure that the country is steered through uncertain times.’ Dr Sharifah went on to mention several programmes which have been designed especially at primary and secondary level. These are:

1. the Early Structured Reading Programme
2. the Children’s Contemporary Literature Programme
3. the Extensive Reading Programme
4. the Courseware Programmes comprising the specially designed teaching courseware for Mathematics, Science and English; and the General English language courseware
5. the Native Speakers Project comprising the District English Language Coordinator (DELIC) Programme, the Project English Teacher (PET) Programme and the GAP Year Programme.

It is interesting to note that at the national level, so much has been done to help students. The eight students are only a small cog in the big wheel. To equip them with the ‘necessary skills, learning and attitudes’ mentioned by Dr. Sharifah, I had to take them out of the school’s mainstream NILAM Programme.

### **THE SAMPLE POPULATION**

The eight students were all boys. They were all Malays from my own Form class which was 1 Al- Khindi 6. This group was homogeneous as they were all thirteen years old and could not speak English. The students were all from the lower income group. All had followed English as a subject in the Primary School. Their English results for the UPSR examination were D with only one C. They had no interest in the learning of English in the primary school. When interviewed, they claimed that no teacher ever made an effort to teach them how to read in English.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methods employed were observation, a simple questionnaire and face-to-face interaction. These were carried out over a eight-month period.

#### **WHAT I DID – Before and During**

Before going to ask the Principal for permission to segregate the eight students from the main group, I admitted that I was hesitant myself. What did I know about handling a group of non readers, and at Form One level? In all my years of English Language teaching, I had only taught Form One once while I was still attached to Sekolah Menengah Sains Kuching. In SMK Tunku Abdul Rahman, it was the second time I taught a class of Form One. Next, when I questioned the Coordinator of the NILAM Programme as to whether students had ever been taken out of the Programme during NILAM time, the reply was in the negative.

I called the eight students to me. I asked them to read for me a page from the Big Book, 'The Lion King.' When no one was able to do so, I asked them to tell me how I would be able to help them. These students were given the autonomy of choice, to decide whether they wanted me to help them learn to read in English or not. By doing this, I would make them feel that the decision to learn was theirs, and not mine. This, to me, would produce a more positive attitude to learn in the students. I even told them that in order to be able to teach them how to read, I had to take them out of the main group. Once our 'negotiations' were complete, I decided to take the plunge and help them.

My only strength was that I really wanted to help these eight students learn how to read. I am an avid reader and to me, reading is a beautiful activity where one can gain a lot of information. To help the students achieve this goal, I decided to focus on the reading process and not its product. In reading, students have to be taught some reading strategies in order to be able to fend for themselves in communication strategies. Instruction in reading strategies is an integral part of the reading activities in the language classroom That was what I set out to do.

One of the first strategies taught to them was phonological awareness. I did this in the first week. Students had to copy down the days of the week before they were taught the phonics. In the Early Structured Reading Programme discussed by Dr. Sharifah, Year 1 and Year 2 pupils in under-achieving primary schools in rural areas are taught how to read using a phonics-based approach. Even though my students were in Form One, yet they qualify to be taught based on this phonics-based approach. I was their role model, and they imitated the sounds made by me.

Beginning with words is also in accordance with Foertsch's (1998) first definition of reading. According to Foertsch, there are three definitions of reading. The first definition refers to learning to read as learning to pronounce words. In the second definition, learning to read means learning to identify words to get their meaning. In the third definition, learning to read means learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it.

In the next week, students continue to learn using the phonics-based approach. They learnt how to pronounce the ordinal numbers from 1 to 20. Again they were asked to copy out the words. This ensures that they were also learning spelling which is another strategy of reading at the same time. The written work also reinforces what is being taught.

During the third week, I put Foertsch's second definition into practice. I asked students to copy out five sentences which I considered as basic knowledge in English. These questions would then become students' existing knowledge in the next activity, which is learning to read short texts. These were:

1. What is your name?
2. Where do you live?
3. How old are you?
4. What is your hobby?
5. When was your grade in English for the UPSR examination?

After they had copied down the sentences into their exercise books, I asked the students to answer my question. Some even had difficulty in answering 'What is your name?' Since students

did not understand what the questions meant, I asked them to tell me the words that they recognized. A few again really did not know anything. Next, I resorted to translation. Then students were asked to read the sentences one by one to get the feel of the words. Students had to copy down the answers too.

In the following weeks, I moved on to the most basic of all reading skills, skimming and scanning. Short texts were used. This activity coincides with Foertsch's third definition of reading which is learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it. A Primary text was used. In this way, students would feel that what they are doing is within their competence. The passages taught included *Who Am I?*, *My Father*, *My Mother* and others. To me, these texts would be meaningful to the students as they teach them to describe themselves, their family and school.

The lesson began with students being given two pages of handout. The first page is on the topic, *Who Am I?*, followed by the picture of a boy on roller skates. The text consisted of the first three sentences which are:

Hello!

My name is Adam.

I am seven years old.

In the next page, the picture of a brother and sister reading is given followed by these two sentences:

Meet my sister Julie.

She is two years younger than me.

Five questions are then asked:

1. Is Adam a boy or a girl?
2. How old is Adam?
3. Who is Julie?
4. Is Julie a boy or a girl?
5. How old is Julie?

Students learn how to skim and scan to answer these questions. Students write down the answers. The second handout is inclusive of an enrichment activity on vocabulary. Students revise the names of some fruits. Their comprehension is aided by the pictures of fruits with accompanying names given. In the following weeks students move on to other topics such as *My Father*, *My Mother*, *My School* and *My Teacher*. The layout of these topics are similar to the first topic, *Who Am I?*

After these lessons on skimming and scanning, students were subsequently taught how to read based on the top down (attend to the overall meaning) and bottom up (focus on words and phrases) approach. To achieve this, students were given a photostated booklet on *Fun with Opposites*. The booklet was given to break the monotony of having students do similar things over the time. Students were told that the booklet was a gift to them for doing so well. This is also done with the intention of boosting their self-confidence and making them feel good. Students

were encouraged to colour the pictures, draw and write out the answers. Simple crossword puzzles were also given in the booklet.

The Principal was supportive of what I was doing and even gave me three Pelangi's Giant Book Series to teach the students. These were Snow White and The Seven Dwarves, Aladdin and The Lion King. I used the read-aloud technique here. According to the National Capital Language Resource Center, Washington, DC (2003, 2004), this is a productive way to teach as a language teacher has 'the ability to use inflection and tone to help them hear what the text is saying.' When the students followed along as I read, it actually helped them to move from word-by-word reading to reading in phrases and thought units, as they did in their first language. After the story had been read, students were asked to tell me what they have understood in the Malay Language.

After the first semester's holidays, students were asked to choose a book each on popular children's literature such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Goldilocks and The Three Bears*, *Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland* and so on. These books had been borrowed out by me from the school library at the beginning of the year. They are simpler versions of the actual story. After they had made their choice, students were asked to copy out a chapter of the book. While they were copying, a student was asked to sit next to me. He would follow what I read page by page. At the end of every page, he was asked to tell me what he had read. Translation was used whenever students could not answer. This was reinforced when I explained the story read in simple English. Students were made to bring the text home to be copied. In the following lesson, a new set of books was given. The procedure was repeated. This went on until the NILAM programme stopped in September.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Whenever a task is given, I would observe the students to see whether they enjoyed the task or they did not. At the same time, praises were used to encourage students to want to learn further. I was actually astounded at the speed of which C managed to read. He started off in January not being able to utter a word in English. I had to lead him word by word whenever it was his turn to read. However by May, he was able to recognize more words than any of the other eight boys, given a new book. He was very happy when I praised him I followed up by telling the class during an English period of his progress and how C was going to be an engineer in future. I could see that he was very proud of his own achievement. From being a boy who never opened his mouth to answer me (until I thought he was either dumb or illiterate), he became a more gregarious boy who could even comment on the boys in class when the boys could not read a text properly in class. It was rewarding to see him walking tall with happiness written all over his face.

Another student, D, was also able to recognize most words by the end of June. This boy was a slow learner, but very hardworking. He was also very proud when he was being praised. These two students are more motivated than the rest of the students. What C said to me when I asked him whether he had tuition or other help outside, he replied that he asked his father who is working as an office boy to speak in English to him. Moreover, he wanted to succeed in life. According to research done on second language acquisition, how motivation affects learning is

not clear. It is not known whether motivation produces successful learning, or successful learning that enhances motivation. Norris (2001:6) is of the opinion that no matter what the underlying motivation to study a second language, 'what cannot be disputed is the fact that motivation is an important variable when examining successful second language acquisition.'

When a participant for the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) 8/2004, Robin Sabai, came to the school to do his practical training, I asked him to test both C and D. This was not a planned event as he happened to come to observe what I was doing with the eight students as his interest is in the NILAM programme. On the spot he agreed. He gave the students five minutes to look at the page he had selected before they were asked to read. Both made a few mistakes in pronunciation with the words 'tie' and 'longer.' He commented:

I happen to observe the process of conducting a special programme to help 'semi-literate' students of English. I conducted a progress test and found out that two of the students in the group were able to read and understand a short text in English. This shows that the programme can produce results. I think it requires a lot of patience from the teacher. The programme is a good one which demonstrates that teachers are always willing to walk the extra mile to make their students better.

(Robin, 2004)

What I had done with this group of students stem from a sincere wish to help students to cope with life in general. One should be farsighted and think of what would happen if we have to bring the same students up the following year. It would be unproductive to blame the system, the students or even the parents. As a saying goes "It is better to light some candles...rather than complain about the darkness.' I know these students might not even pass their English examinations but at the very least I had shown them that if they are willing to try, if their self-motivation is strong, they can succeed. 'Where there is a will, there is a way' is still true. When students discover they are able to read, their self-esteem is also increased.

It helped, of course, that all these students were in my English class. I was able to monitor their progress or lack of it. Two other students appear to be dyslexia as I cannot understand what they have copied. An English text appeared Greek to me after they had completed their work. I am not trained to deal with this special learning deficiency. However, I had tried to inform both parents about this. One of the parents was very disappointed with his own son while the other did not consider it a serious problem.

## CONCLUSION

What I had done might not be the best methods available. However, I did what I could. At the very least, I had made them able to understand some English words. I had motivated them and given them faith in themselves and their own abilities. I would like to remind all teachers that if we offered a hand to help students, possibly we could help to change a few.



## Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to only every Thursday during the NILAM time which was from 7.00 to 7.50. Most times, students do not remember what they had learnt the week before. Some time had to be spent on revising what they had learnt before real teaching took place. There were limited materials available as the teacher had to use what was available to her in school.

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**SOME TITLES OF BOOKS USED IN THE READING PROGRAMME**

Science Stories for Little Children. KL: Arowana Publications.

1. Tadpoles Look for Their Mother
2. The Mouse That Wants Hard Wood
3. Father Seahorse Gives Birth
4. Spider's New Web
5. Before It Rains
6. Tears of a Giant Turtle
7. The Rhino's Good Friends
8. The Chimpanzees Look For Food
9. Rafflesia, the Rare Plant
10. Where are you, Mummy?
11. The Expert Gilder
12. Who Has the Strongest Mouth?
13. The Desert is My Home
14. The Little Lizard Loses His Tail
15. Baby Elephant Finds Banana Seeds
16. I Can't Change My Clothes

Pelangi's Giant Book Series. Johore Bahru: Penerbitan Pelangi Sdn Bhd.

1. Aladdin
2. The Lion King
3. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

The Big Book Series

1. The Gingerbread Man
2. The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse
3. The Hare and the Tortoise
4. The Frog Prince
5. Sleeping Beauty
6. The Magic Porridge Pot

Brainchild Series. KL: Kiddibird Sdn Bhd. - Fun With Opposites