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AN EXAMINATION OF LITERARY TEXTS PRESCRIBED FOR LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the readability of literary texts in Malaysian lower secondary schools. A quantitative research method took place to find out students' views on reading the literary texts prescribed in terms of: i) readability of the texts ii) cultural familiarity of the texts iii) physical features of the texts iv) interest and motivation v) preferred literary texts.. A cross-sectional survey was conducted. A set of questionnaire containing 127 questions was distributed to 450 respondents in five districts of Perak. Data from 450 questionnaires were used in the SPSS statistics software version 20.0 to analyse students' views in five aspects of the literary texts prescribed and presented in the form of percentages. The findings indicate students are positive on the readability of literary text especially the prose forms, they understand the culture portrayed in the novel, on physical aspects, the cover of the texts for Form Two and Three do not seem to attract them. Besides, students are motivated and interested in the literary texts prescribed for them and much preferred prose themes among students is on family. The implication of the research indicates readability of literary texts depends on text and reader factors. Both the factors play a significant role in the process of reading and understanding the literary texts.

Keywords: *Readability, literary texts, cultural familiarity, physical features.*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian literature in English Language begins in Malaya under the British rule in the first half of the 20th century. Literature for the general reading public was mainly written in the vernacular language or in Arabic (Siti Rohaini, 2010). Through the education system during the British government, English Language and literature became a significant component in Malaysia. The selection of texts by the British government was used in schools. After independence, Malaysia selected their own. They have been a support material to enhance literacy skills among Malaysian students.

By reading a piece of literature, learners can understand the diverse use of words, phrases, phrasal verbs, multiple meanings, and idioms. They learn to use familiar words in new contexts with new meanings. Students get absorbed in the story, the language for example the sentences, phrasal patterns and words are understood and mastered without much effort in the process (Kavidha, 2002). As such, they consolidate and build on their foundational learning in English related to texts and language.

According to the scholars, research show that learners can learn a great deal of English Language through literature which is not taught to them explicitly. They are able to use their own learning strategies to find out the underlying systems that govern the language they are learning. The more

varied and interesting their learning experiences are, the more opportunities they will have to learn more about the language. Literature is the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language. The province of literature is the human condition with all its feelings, thoughts and insights (Widdowson, 1975).

What better way to motivate students to read and learn more, than using literature texts? There is a genuine feel to literature texts that cannot be found in other materials, particularly those which emphasize pedagogy over experience (Duff & Maley, 1990). They touch on themes that offer opportunities for learners to react based on their own life experiences. Literature provides a language model for those who hear and read it. Good literature exposes children to correct sentence patterns, standard story structures, and varied word usage. Children for whom English is a second language can improve their English with the interesting context.

Moreover, literature supports all areas of the language arts curriculum. Listening to stories provides opportunities for honing listening skills, and discussion allows children to express their thoughts, feelings, and reactions. When students read literature, they are practicing their comprehension strategies in meaningful situations.

As plethora of benefits lie in reading literature texts in year 2000, literature was formally integrated into the English Language Syllabus as a taught and tested component. This significant move marked the formal acknowledgement and appreciation of the role of literature in ELT in Malaysia. The decision to use literature as a resource in the language classroom was prompted by several reasons which are outlined in 'Surat Pekeliling' Ikhtisas Bil. 4/2000 dated 18 February 2000 issued by the Ministry of Education. The overall aim of the Literature Component is to:

- i. in calculate the reading habit among students;
- ii. enhance students' proficiency in the English Language through the study of a set of prescribed literary texts;
- iii. contribute to personal development and character building; and
- iv. broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world views

Furthermore, this component would form the base for an appreciation of literature in English with its concern with humanity, values, beliefs and customs as well as its great intellectual tradition and heights of imagination and creativity. By the same it is hoped that the study of literature would enhance the learning of the language in providing interesting language in context for students and heightens the effectiveness of the literature content of the KBSM English Language curriculum. With effective implementation of this component in the language curriculum, students would achieve greater understanding of themselves and others and eventually be able to perform effectively and positively as members of society in keeping with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy (Haji Senan, 2000).

The Ministry of Education hopes that the students' personal development and self-enrichment will be enhanced through literature (Ministry of Education, 2000). By the end of the secondary school, students should be able to achieve several objectives, among them: giving a personal response to the text; showing an awareness of how language is used to achieve a particular purpose; reflecting upon and drawing valuable moral lessons from the issues and concerns of life as portrayed in the literary works and relating them to their lives and understanding as well as appreciating other cultures with the exposure to short stories, poems, novels and plays.

Table 1. Literature texts prescribed for lower secondary schools in Perlis, Perak, Kedah, Kelantan, Pulau Pinang, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Terengganu, Sabah and Sarawak.

Form	Poems	Short story	Drama	Novel
One	Sad I ams by Alain Troiter News Break by Max Fatchen	Fair's Fair by Narinder Dhami	-	20,000 Leagues Under The Sea by Jules Verne (Perak, Kelantan, Pulau Pinang, Perlis and Kedah) King Arthur by Janet Hardy-Gould (Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Sabah and Sarawak) The Swiss Family Robinson by Johan D. Wyss (Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka)

Table 1 continued...

Two	<i>My Hero</i> by Willis <i>What is Red</i> by Mary O' Neill	<i>Cheat</i> by Allan Baillie	<i>A Night Out</i> by O. Henry	-
Three	<i>A Fighter's Lines</i> by Marzuki Ali <i>Leisure</i> by William Henry Davies	-	-	<i>The Railway Children</i> by John Escott (Perak, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Kedah and Kelantan) <i>Around the World in 80 Days</i> by Jules Verne (Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Sabah and Sarawak) <i>How I Met Myself</i> by David by A. Hill (Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka).

In Table 1, the lower secondary school students in the all states in Malaysia read a total of 6 poems, 2 short stories, a drama and 2 novels, one of it are a graphic novel for Form One students. These literary texts are selected, hoping that they would aspire students to read and explore the texts. Eventually, aids in achieving the aims and objectives outlined by the Ministry of Education. As literary texts play a significant role in the improvement of students' English Language proficiency, it is wise to investigate whether the newly selected literary texts match students' needs and how students react towards the new literature component since it marked the second round of the implementation of literature component in the year 2011. The success of teaching and learning activities in a classroom correlates with the condition of the text. As such, this study will shed light on students' views on reading the literary texts prescribed in terms of: i) readability of the texts ii) cultural familiarity of the texts iii) physical features of the texts iv) interest and motivation v) preferred literary texts.

DEFINING LITERATURE

Literature text is confined to the notion that it is writing in prose or verse which contains complex ideas and meanings. It deals with universal issues that are important to an audience and written in an original and imaginative way. It is a world of fantasy, feelings and visions that is put into words for readers to understand and suggest many possible interpretations. It actually can take the readers to a world where they have never been before and by doing so, literature texts can create a sense of wonder and adventure (Rae, 1991).

O'Sullivan (1991) believes that reading literature is one of the best ways to inspire the writer in the learners. He asserted that literature creates a longing for learning the language. Literary texts encourage the students to identify with or react against the characters that attract their attention. The learners become more active, involved and engaged while learning the language through literature. Literature texts stimulate the learners to solve mysteries and answer questions, creative activity that fosters deeper connections. Literature texts have many instances of 'deviant language' usages. These can be used as a resource for the teacher to expose the students to a variety of text types and different uses of language, and thus in turn to teach the language. By reading literature texts, students are exposed to various cultures as well as various styles and levels of English.

Text Selection

Text selection reveals as an important factor in making literature a resource for linguistic development, personal enrichment and cultural appreciation. Collie and Slater (1994) suggest that text selection depend on each particular group of students, their needs, interests, cultural background and language level (1994). Hill (1995) mentions student's cultural background, linguistic proficiency, literacy background, the data of composition, interesting texts and availability and suitability of the text are important criteria for texts selection. Text selection is a delicate process (Hill, 1995).

Important aspects such as the language level, subject matter, prior knowledge of learners and interest level should be guidelines for literary text selection. Cultural familiarity may have its place in text selection. Familiarity with the subject matter of the text, certain language use or reference to objects unique of them readers' culture may help activate the reader's existing prior knowledge,

which in turn may work to aid reading and comprehension. This may prove to be helpful for the teacher when teaching the texts because through such a selection it combines what is to be read and what is known about learners' life worlds to achieve maximum comprehension.

Readability

Pikulski (1998) defines readability as the level of ease or difficulty with which text material can be understood by a particular reader who is reading that text for a specific purpose. Readability is dependent on many characteristics of a text and many characteristics of readers. Thus, one important characteristic of readability is that it reflects the interactive nature of the construct which takes place between the text and the reader.

Besides, Rubin (1985) concluded readability of texts require a great deal of professional judgment on the part of the teacher and text selectors. In order to make decisions about which texts are appropriate for which students, the teacher must know the students, the genres and the reading process.

Educators and text selectors, know best what content is appropriate for each student (Brooks, 1996). Student's interest in the subject-matter plays a significant role to determine the readability of materials (Rubin, 1985). Rubin (ibid) continues, texts within the same level have different degrees of appropriateness for different students, depending on their background knowledge and personal interests. The same text materials may be very easy for one reader yet extraordinarily difficult to another. As such, text-reader factors are deciding factors in readability.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design involves quantitative research methods in collecting and analysing data. A cross-sectional survey was conducted as a data collection technique to obtain the viewpoint from the secondary school students on the second cycle of literary texts prescribed.

Research Samples

Students from Form One to Form Three were selected as respondents in 40 non-residential schools in five districts of Perak. The schools are situated in Batang Padang, Manjung, Hilir Perak, Kuala Kangsar, and Hulu Perak. The selection of respondents from the schools in each district was based on simple random sampling method comprising both genders from various races, and different social backgrounds.

Research Instruments

A survey questionnaire was developed for students consisting of 127 questions. The questionnaire for students were built on and developed based on scholars' views in the relevant field. The specific content of the items for the variables involved were developed based on the operational definitions developed for the research, reading of relevant literature, informal interviews and discussions with secondary school students and also adaptation of certain items for the instruments used by other researchers in the same field (Miall & Kuiken 1995). The questionnaire for students takes the form of a fixed format self-report measure (Sayfa, 2013). Students were required to express their views using a five-point Likert scale. The scores followed the point value of Strongly disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Fairly agree =3, Agree = 4 and Strongly agree = 5.

Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency counts and percentages were used to present and summarize the data from the questionnaire. Data from 450 questionnaires were used in the SPSS statistics software version 20.0 to analyse students' views in five aspects of the literary texts prescribed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' View on the Literary Texts Prescribed

Readability of the literary texts

Prose forms

Generally, students are positive on the readability of literary text especially the prose forms. Data revealed that 52.0% of the students find the short stories easy to read and 34.5% of the

students agreed that they could understand them easily. The data showed that 41.2% students agreed the sentence structures are easy to understand but 31% students are uncertain about whether they understand all the words in the short story. Although comprehension of all words is beyond their ability, 47.3% of the participants believed they still understand the flow of the story. When participant understand the plot, 43.4% of the students understand the issues discussed and 40.9% understand the themes portrayed in the short story.

Data revealed 42.3% agreed the novel is easy to read and 42.0% of the students find it easy to understand. The process of reading involves comprehension of words and sentence structures. It is enlightening to note that 41.2% of the students can easily understand the words and 38.9% understand the sentence structures. This led them to understand easily the flow of the story. A total of 50.7 % of the students agreed that they understand the flow of the story, issues 51.5% and 41.4% of the students understand the theme portrayed in the novel.

Poems

A total of 69.2% of the students agreed, the poems prescribed are easy to read. As the poems are easy to read, 51.1% of the students feel they could understand them. To detail more on students' understanding on poems, the data showed 36.5 % of the students feel they understand each stanza of the poems. However, 42.3% of the students are uncertain about understanding all the words in the poems. A total of 54.0% of the students understand the theme portrayed in the poems.

Drama

A total of 48.9% of the students agreed the drama prescribed is easy to read and 50.9 % could easily understand it. The data showed 43.8% of the students agreed the sentence structures are easy to understand and 56.0% of the students understand the flow of the drama. A total of 42.5% of the students understand the theme and 39.2% understand the issues discussed in the drama. However, 33% of the students are uncertain of understanding all the words in the text.

Students' views on cultural familiarity of the literary texts

Novel

The data showed 51.1% agreed they understand the culture portrayed in the novel. A total of 50.9% can picture Westerners' way of life through the novel and 50.4% showed students can differentiate their way of life to the Westerners'. The data showed 32.3% disagreed that they face problems in understanding the prose because of cultural differences. A total of 51.8% agreed the novel exposes to the culture that interest them and 30.4% agreed their way of life is similar to the characters in the novel. The data showed 46.7% believe the novel enhances rational thinking, critical thinking 46.7% and creative thinking 54.0%. A total of 50.4% believe the moral values portrayal helps them to be someone useful in future.

Short stories

A total of 55.3% of the students could picture the way of Western living and 32.1% disagreed that they face problems in understanding the short story due to Western culture. The data showed 49.1% of the students agreed short stories expose them to the culture which interests them. However, 31.4% of the students are uncertain that their life experiences are similar to characters involved in the short stories. It is enlightening to note that 56.4% of the students agreed the short stories enhances rational thinking, 50.2% on critical thinking and 56.6% on creative thinking. The data showed 47.6% of the students believed the moral values portrayed in the short stories help them to be a useful person in future.

Poems

A total of 47.3% agreed that they understand the culture portrayed in the poems and 50.4% of the students believed the moral values help them to be a useful person in future.

Drama

The data showed 42.5% agreed they understand the culture portrayed and 42.5% agreed that they could picture the way of Western living. 32.3% are uncertain that they face problems in

comprehension of texts due to cultural differences and 46.0% of the students agreed that the drama prescribed expose them to cultures, which interest them. The data showed 31.2% are uncertain that their life experiences are similar to the characters in the drama. A total of 46.5% believe drama enhances rational thinking and 44.5% on critical thinking and 52.9% on creative thinking.

Students' views on physical features of the literary texts

Cover of the book

The data showed 59.1% disagreed the cover of the text is beautiful or expressive.

Word font

A total of 67.0% of the students agreed they are comfortable with the font of the words used in the literary texts.

Prose forms

A total of 36.5% disagreed the short stories are not lengthy and 56.6% believe the pictures in the short stories help them understand the flow of the story. The data showed 59.1% of the students believe the pictures in the novel help them understand the flow of the story and 36.7% disagreed the novel prescribed is not lengthy.

Poems

A total of 35.6% of the students agreed the poems are not lengthy and 44.2% of the students agreed that the meaning of difficult words are comprehensible by referring to the glossary attached at back of the book.

Students' interest and motivation in reading literary texts

Cover of the book

Students are quite negative on the cover of literature book. The data showed 63.5% disagreed the cover attracts them and 61.7% disagreed that it motivates students to read the texts.

Prose forms

A total of 36.7% of the students are interested in reading the short stories but 34.1% disagreed the technique of writing the short story motivates them to read. The data revealed 53.3% of the students believe the moral values portrayed in the short stories motivate them in reading. Besides, factors which attract students to read the short stories are the setting (43.8%), culture exposed in the prose forms (46.7%) and pictures (53.0 %).

The data revealed 50.9% are interested in reading the novel. Factors which interest students to read are the technique of writing the novel (60.0%), setting discussed (52.2%), pictures inserted (64.4%) and the data showed 54.0 % of the students believe the moral values portrayed motivate them to read.

Poems

A total of 30.5% are interested to read the poems but 31.4% of the students are uncertain that the technique of writing the poems motivates them in reading. The data revealed 48.7% agreed that the moral values portrayal motivates them to read and 38.3% believed that the setting discussed could also be a reason, which attracts students to read poems. Besides, 51.8% believed the culture discussed and 56.2% of the students felt the pictures inserted in the poems attract them to read.

Drama

The data revealed 56.9% are interested in reading the drama prescribed and 46.7% believed the technique of writing the drama interest them to read. A total of 47.6% of the students are motivated to read the drama because of the moral value portrayed. The figure below shows students are attracted to read the drama because of the setting (56.6%), culture (53.1%) and pictures inserted (52.2%).

Students' view on preferred literary texts

Data showed 52.0% preferred literary texts on family theme and 39.6% liked texts on love and affection. A total of 38.9% preferred mystery, 31.2% liked horror and 34.3% preferred adventure. A total of 43.1% liked religious theme, 45.4% preferred theme on society and 41.6% liked texts on humanity. Data revealed 48.2% preferred texts on environment and 38.5% on patriotism. It is to be noted that 27.7% disliked texts on history and 34.7% of the students preferred sad prose.

A total of 33.8% liked texts about women and 30.3% of the students liked theme on war. Data depicted 34.7% liked texts on human rights and 42.9% preferred texts about children. A total of 40.9% preferred happy theme and 38.9% liked science. Data showed 42.5% liked issues on teenagers and 38.5% liked themes on animals. A total of 41.4% liked village society and 45.1% preferred theme which discussed on current society. A total of 36.5% liked texts on futuristic society and 37.4% liked society of yester years.

The data revealed 36.9% liked novel and short stories relating to students' lives, 40.0% also preferred prose on their country and 40.9% liked texts relating to other countries and 47.1% of the students liked prose forms from other countries. A total of 42.9% of the students liked poems related to their life experiences and 42.3% preferred poems related to their society. On illustrations, data revealed 61.7% preferred colour comic pictures to guide students in comprehending the novel. Table 2 below shows students' preference on the themes of prose forms in descending order, from much preferred to the least preferred themes, in the form of percentages.

Table 2: Students' preferred prose themes.

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Percentages (%)</i>
Family	52.0
Environment	48.2
Current society	45.4
Religious	43.1
Children	42.9
Students' life experiences	42.9
Teenagers	42.5
Humanity	41.6
Village society	41.4
About another country	40.9
Happy	40.9
One's country	40.0
Love and affection	39.6
Science	38.9
Mystery	38.9
Animals	38.5
Patriotism	38.5
Society of yester years	37.4
Sad	37.4
Students' lives	36.9
Futuristic society	36.5
Human rights	34.7
Adventure	34.3
Woman	33.8
Horror	31.2
War	30.3
History	27.7

Discussion

Based on the data, the findings revealed that lower secondary students are positive towards the readability of literary texts, comprising variety of genres, prose forms (short stories and novel) poems and drama. Despite the positive response towards the readability of literary texts, students felt understanding all difficult words in the literary texts is beyond their ability although the meaning of difficult words are given in the glossary.

Besides, students are also uncertain their comprehension towards the literary texts is distant to cultural differences. They also feel the poems and novel prescribed are lengthy. Moreover, it was found that the cover of the text does not play a role in capturing students' interest nor it motivated

them to read. The findings revealed students disliked literary texts on history and colour comic pictures are preferred by students to guide them in comprehension of literary texts.

The findings from the survey research technique, uncovered the readability of literary texts depends on both reader and text factors. From the survey, the text factors analysed are the state of cover of the texts, the difficulty of words and sentence structures, text organisation, the size of the fonts, the length of the texts and appropriate illustrations. The reader factors are students' background knowledge, interest, their motivation and engagement in reading the literary texts and preferred literary texts. Both the factors play a significant role in the process of reading and understanding the literary texts.

A lapse between any of the two readability factors could cripple students' reading process and affect their reading comprehension. When students are comfortable with the prescribed literary texts and in accordance to their needs, many positive aspects and values are gained by the students. For example, develop their thinking skills to be rational, critical and creative. Literary text exposes students to other societies, culture and traditions. This exposure would mould students to be a holistic person as outlined in the National Education Philosophy of Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This research has provided valuable insights in analysing the readability of literary on five aspects of the current literary texts. It is found that students have positive views on them. However, dissatisfaction among the students is obvious on the physical aspects of readability. The Ministry of Education could make use of these research findings to select literary texts that suits the need of Malaysian lower secondary students.

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