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AN ANALYSIS OF A SECONDARY SCHOOL EFL READING CURRICULUM: TYPES OF READING TASKS

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Abstract

One of the goals of the Malaysian lower secondary EFL curriculum is to prepare students for EFL reading at a higher level of education. In line with this goal, the purpose of the current study was to examine the design of reading tasks in terms of the types with regards to reading in academic areas at the tertiary level. The study was conducted in the Malaysian setting at the secondary school level. The data for the study were collected by reviewing curriculum documents such as the Malaysian Form Three English Language Curriculum Specifications and the Form Three English language textbook. Reading tasks extracted from the curriculum documents were coded using Anderson et al.'s (1991) three major reading task types and an additional category for reading tasks that do not fall into the three major reading task categories. The data for this study were analyzed using manifest content analysis. In terms of preparing students for academic reading in English at the tertiary level, the reading task types in the selected curriculum seems to include training students on major reading task types such as identifying main, ideas, identifying details and making inference. However, statistically, the findings show that the provision for the major task types is much lower than the provision in training students on other skills such as fluency. Such finding has implications on the effectiveness of the curriculum at the instructional implementation level. Hence, based on the findings of this study, there is a need for a curriculum revision in order to achieve the respective curriculum goal.

Keywords: Reading curriculum, reading tasks, secondary school, EFL

1 INTRODUCTION

Reading is the basic foundation in which academic skills and performance of an individual are built. For the past three decades, the theories of reading has evolved from being a process of decoding to a "guessing game in which the reader constructs a message encoded by the writer (Goodman, 1986, p. 554) to an active process of comprehending where learners need to be taught strategies (e.g. guess from context, define expectations, make inferences, skim ahead, etc) to read more efficiently (Grabe, 1991, p. 377). Grabe (1991) further reiterates that reading comprehension is a combination of identification and interpretation skills. Hence, reading does not just enhance a child's ability to comprehend and process concepts and ideas in prints but it also assists and develops ones critical and creative thinking skills. Reading also allows the development of the vocabulary system, sharpens language skills and leads to greater cognitive development. Thus reading is seen as an interactive process between the reader and text and it paves the way for education and self-enlightenment.

In the context of reading in English in a foreign language (EFL), numerous studies have shown that reading in EFL slightly differs to reading in the first language (Carrell, 1989; Kamhi-Stein, 2004) and it involves a multitude of processes (Bernhardt, 2005; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Nassaji, 2003; Koda, 2005). Apart from acquiring a sound knowledge of vocabulary of the foreign language, an EFL learner should also possess good EFL reading skills such as low-level processing skills (word recognition, syntactic processing) to high-level processing skills (skimming, scanning, making inferences, predicting and synthesizing) for a fruitful reading process (McWhorter, 2002; Floris & Divina, 2009; Yuko, Yasuo & Maki, 2013). These reading skills are crucial for successful reading in the academic areas as well and these have paramount importance without which the information will not be understood (Wassman & Rinsky, 2000). Since EFL reading in content area encompasses a different set of reading skills in comparison to reading in L1, learners need to

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be taught of the important EFL reading comprehension skills which will further assist them in their academic reading and become good readers (Naidu, Briewin, Embi, 2013).

In Malaysia, English is a necessary requirement to pursue higher education learning. In line with this view, reading in the English language is a vital skill that students must master in schools and at tertiary level. However, majority of English language learners (ELL) in Malaysia have the negative perception that reading English language materials are daunting, laborious and intimidating (Sidek, 2008) as they encounter various problems in processing such texts. Among some of the problems are inadequate ability in performing different reading task types, deficiency in vocabulary knowledge and incompetent in higher order thinking skills.

This study focuses on the reading task types that students must acquire as they study the process of reading. Reading task types such as identifying main ideas, locating details and making inferences are imperative as without these a reader might not be able to extract essential information from a reading passage thus hinders comprehension or a reader might have a misleading perception of the ideas conveyed by the author. Various studies in Malaysia have found that students fail to demonstrate the ability to infer and make connections among ideas in texts, an important skill in content area reading (Kanagasabai, 1996; Nambiar, 2007; Ponniah, 1993). The student's poor reading ability in applying reading task types would also affect their overall academic performance (Faizah, Zalizan & Norzaini, 2002; Ramaiah, 1996). Further expounded by Norizul and Abdul Rashid (2100), reading classroom practices did not always prepare learners to maximize skills and strategies to predict, infer, analyse and evaluate by interacting with the reading texts given. Studies conducted by Sidek (2010) and Sidek et.al (2013) also supplement the argument above in which her studies revealed that upper secondary students in Malaysia were unable to apply reading task types in their reading activity. This probably signifies that secondary students in school were somehow not equipped with these reading tasks types and thus contributes to the deteriorating performance in reading academic content area in the tertiary education.

Thus the present study was aimed at investigating whether the design of reading tasks in terms of the types with regards to reading in academic areas at the tertiary level are given critical emphasis in the English language curriculum in Malaysia. Majority of past studies on reading in Malaysia seldom concentrated on this important issue as many focused on other issues such as metacognitive strategies (Muhammad, Chew & Kabilan, 2006; Gani Hamzah & Abdullah, 2009), knowledge on linguistic cues (Ibrahim & Mohamed Nor, 2011), reading disabilities (Abdullah, 2006) and text selection (Syed Abdul Rahman, 2010). Thus by conducting this study, new findings could be generated to address the probable reading problems among secondary and tertiary education learners.

2 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the types of reading tasks that students are trained with at the Malaysian schools by examining a secondary school EFL reading curriculum. The study attempted to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: What types of reading tasks are reflected in the Malaysian Form Three EFL reading curriculum?

Research Question 2: Does the Malaysian Form Three EFL reading curriculum emphasize on the teaching of major reading tasks types?

2.1 Research Context

The Malaysian Form Three English language reading curriculum is the research context of the present research. Form Three is the final year in the Malaysian lower secondary school system before students continue their studies at the upper-secondary school beginning from the Form Four. Form Three in the Malaysian system is equivalent to 9th grade in the American school system.

2.2 Sources of Data

The data for this study were obtained from two curriculum documents: The Form Three English Language Curriculum Specifications document and the Form Three English language textbook. The Form Three

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English Language Specifications document comprises learning outcomes and the specifications on the skills to achieve the stipulated learning outcomes. The Form Three English language textbook is a mandated textbook by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE). Teachers must incorporate the textbook in instruction. However, additional materials, which the teachers consider relevant can also be used in EFL instruction.

2.3 Data Collection

The data for the current study were obtained by reviewing the two selected Form Three EFL curriculum documents. Statements that are inferred to be related to reading were elicited from the curriculum documents. The list of reading-related statements or reading tasks from both documents was inferred as the Form Three English language reading curriculum. The reliability indexes of statements inferred as reading tasks in the Form Three English Language Curriculum Specifications document and in the Form Three English language textbook are 0.87 and 0.83 respectively.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed using manifest content analysis. Anderson et al.'s (1991) coding for reading task types was used to categorize the reading tasks. There are three major reading task types based on Anderson et al.'s (1991) coding: Identifying main ideas, Identifying detail and Making inferences. An additional category labeled as 'Other Reading Tasks' was added to Anderson et al.'s (1990) coding for reading tasks that did not fall into the three major categories of reading tasks. The followings are the examples of how the reading tasks were coded:

Identifying Main Ideas

Identifying Main Ideas was inferred in statements such as:

- Process information by skimming and scanning for specific information and ideas
- Process information by extracting main ideas
- Identifying different point of views

Identifying Details

Identifying Details was inferred in statements such as:

- Process information in a reading text by extracting details;
- Process information by getting the explicit meaning of text;
- Processing texts read by scanning for details

Making Inferences

Making Inferences was inferred in statements such as:

- Read a text on famous personalities and answer open-ended questions by making inferences;
- Read an informal letter on teenage problems and answer open-ended questions by making inferences;
- Read an article on youth and leisure and draw conclusions by making inferences;

Other Reading Tasks

- Read a text aloud
- Read a text and study the format of the letter in the text
- Read a text and pronounce words correctly

3 FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to the research questions:

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Research Question 1: What types of reading tasks are reflected in the Malaysian Form Three EFL reading curriculum?

The findings for Research Question 1 are presented in Tables 1 to 5.

Table 1 demonstrates the findings for identifying details in both the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and EFL textbook. There is a slight emphasis of this type of reading task type in the EFL curriculum document in comparison to a mere 4.7% emphasis in the EFL textbook.

Table 1: Identifying Details

Documents	(%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	23.7
EFL Textbook	4.7

Table 2 displays the findings on identifying main ideas as one of the major types of reading tasks. The results show that the EFL textbook concentrates on this reading task type with 25% in contrast to the EFL Curriculum Specifications document with 21.1%.

Table 2: Identifying Main Ideas

Documents	(%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	21.1
EFL Textbook	25

Table 3 exhibits the findings for the third reading task type which is making inferences. The EFL Curriculum Specifications document has a small emphasis with 18.4% but it is given a much minimal emphasis in the EFL Textbook with only 6.1%.

Table 3: Making Inference

Documents	(%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	18.4
EFL Textbook	6.1

Table 4 reveals the findings of other reading tasks types which are evident in both documents. The EFL Curriculum Specifications document has a significant weight on vocabulary with 23.7% and has least emphasis on spelling and fluency. No emphasis was given on language functions. In comparison, the EFL textbook highly emphasized on grammar (37%) with vocabulary (11.6%) being the second most focused other reading task type. Language functions received 8.3% focus in the EFL textbook

Table 4: Other Reading Task Types

Documents / Other Types of Reading Tasks	Vocab (%)	Text Structure (%)	Fluency (%)	Grammar (%)	Language Functions (%)	Spelling (%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	23.7	5.3	2.6	5.3	0	2
EFL Textbook	11.6	5.5	1.9	37.0	8.3	0

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.Table 5 describes the overall findings of other reading task types. A significant emphasis was given on other reading task types in the EFL Textbook in contrast to 36.8% emphasis in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document.

Table 5: Summary of Other Tasks Type

Documents	(%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	36.8
EFL Textbook	64.4

Research Question 2: Does the Malaysian Form Three EFL reading curriculum emphasize on the teaching of major reading tasks types?

In order to answer Research Question 2, Table 6 was generated to compare the provision of major reading task types and other reading task types.

Table 6 exhibits the findings of the reading task types in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and EFL textbook. In both documents, other reading task types received more emphasis in comparison to the major reading task types. The EFT Curriculum Specifications has a slight balance among all three major reading task types with a slight different of 3-4%. Although more emphasis was given on other reading task types (36.8%), the difference was not too large. Unlike the EFL textbook, it focused on identifying main ideas (25%) and discarding the importance of identifying details and making inferences and the heavy concentration on other reading task types (64.4%) is an intriguing issue. This findings prove that the Malaysian Form Three EFL reading curriculum emphasize on other reading task types from the major reading task types, which is the focus of this study.

Table 6: Comparison of Major Reading Tasks and Other Reading Tasks

Documents / Types of Reading Tasks	Details (%)	Main Ideas (%)	Inferences (%)	*Others (%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	23.7	21.1	18.4	36.8
EFL Textbook	4.7	25	6.1	64.4

4   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The significant findings from this study show that there is an imbalance of focus and emphasis in providing reading passages with major reading task types in the EFL Curriculum Specifications and EFL Textbook. The EFL Curriculum Specification documents emphasized more on identifying details but the EFL textbook focused more in identifying main ideas. Both documents did not give much emphasis on making inferences, which is also an important reading task type.

Another important finding, which answers Research Question 2 is that both documents gave more focus on reading activities that stressed on other types of reading tasks such as vocabulary and grammar. It is important to note that at the Form 3 level, students must already be competent in identifying main ideas, locating details and making inferences in preparation for more challenging reading in the upper secondary and tertiary education.

This uneven pattern of distribution of reading task types signals that both curriculum and textbook are probably not in alignment in their theoretical knowledge of what constitutes major reading tasks. Apart from that, revision must be made to the EFL Curriculum Specifications document to balance out the distribution of the three major reading task types, with slightly increasing the reading statements on identifying main ideas and making inferences. The EFL textbook on the other hand, must provide more reading passages that allow students to develop their abilities in identifying details and making inferences. Both documents should have less emphasis on other types of reading tasks to suit the requirement needed to process reading passages at a much higher level. This discrepancy in emphasis also means that the reading task types in

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the Form 3 English language curriculum are not fully designed to prepare the Form 3 students for reading in the academic area in the tertiary level of education.

In conclusion, this study has revealed that both EFL Curriculum Specifications document and the EFL textbook are not in alignment in terms of distribution of the major reading task types. These results also support the findings of the earlier mentioned past researches, which highlighted the prolonging problem in reading among students in Malaysia. A balanced distribution of identifying main ideas, locating details and making inferences are crucial as these reading task types must be acquired by secondary students in order to excel in reading at the upper secondary and tertiary levels of education. This strong view is supported by Afflerbach, Pearson and Paris (2008) who contended that the ability to identify main ideas is an important necessity for successful reading comprehension. Thus, the instructional design of reading tasks in both documents should be in stronger alignment in order to provide the required reading task types for learners.

1. INTED Proceeding can be found at this URL:
http://scholar.google.com/scholar?oi=bibs&hl=en&cluster=3698969378249171439&btnI=1

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