

## TEACHING READING IN RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SABAH: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

Several studies have indicated education inequality between rural students and urban students. In language learning, students in rural areas have lower proficiency in English than those in urban areas. The aims of the present study were to investigate the perceptions, instructional knowledge and classroom practices of English teachers in teaching reading in rural areas in Sabah. An online survey was conducted on a sample of 20 secondary English teachers in a teacher professional development programme in Kudat, Sabah. The implications of these findings for future practice in rural high schools are discussed.

*Keywords: rural schools, reading, teacher beliefs, authentic reading materials, ELL secondary learners*

### 1. Introduction

In public secondary education in Malaysia, English is generally learned as a second language. However, English could be a third language or a foreign language to some students in rural areas. Teachers typically teach five periods i.e., 150 minutes of English a week with each lesson comprising the teaching of grammar, reading extracts and answering comprehension questions in workbooks and textbooks. Form One to Form Five textbooks are prescribed from by the Ministry of Education. Other than the workbooks, the text is the only reading material in the class. These reading passages are usually extracted from longer stories. Teachers may randomly ask a student or the whole class to read aloud these short passages followed by answering comprehension questions in the books.

One reading related programme - NILAM programme or Reading Habit the Key to Knowledge- has been implemented by the Ministry of Education since 1999 for all levels in primary and secondary schools. The objective is to inculcate reading habits among school children. Only half an hour per week is allocated for this programme. Students may choose any books and, in any languages, they like to read, and are expected to record their reading activities in their Reading Record Books within the allotted time. In theory, NILAM seems to encourage students to read more. In practice, it seems unrealistic because students are entirely left on their own without any teachers' support. Even if they choose to read stories in English, whether they are reading fluently is not known. Students may turn the pages and appear to be behaviourally engaged. This form of observable behaviours might not reveal students' reading engagement. They may write in their NILAM book provided, yet no one is certain whether they understand the story or just copy the sentences from the story. As of today, there is little literature concerning NILAM has on ELL secondary students' reading achievement in Malaysia.

Two assessments that show the reading performance of students in Malaysia are the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM). In PISA 2012, 15-year-old Malaysian students - comprised 40.2% from the rural areas

and 59.8% from the urban areas - performed relatively well in lower-level reading skills such as retrieving information compared to the higher-order reading skills (Puteh, Zin, & Ismail, 2016). In PISA 2018, out of nearly 80 nations, 15-year-old Malaysian students ranked 56<sup>th</sup> in reading assessment. Over half of them attained Level 2 proficiency in reading (Level 6 on the PISA scale is the best). Malaysian students from urban schools outperformed students from rural schools. Students who had greater support from their teachers scored higher in reading. Teaching practices such as teachers' enthusiasm and stimulation of reading engagement were the attributes associated with students' enjoyment of reading. Another national examination in 2019, Malaysian Certificate of Education or SPM English, rural areas students regressed significantly when compared to the previous year.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***Rural schools and reading***

The definition of rural schools varies in different areas (Pratt, 2018). Rural schooling should not be limited to certain locations or merely based on the researchers' terms. According to Pratt (2018), an area to be considered as rural "is a matter of perspective and understanding." It is largely defined by the distance people drive to a store or a place. In general, rural students come from homes with fewer educational resources (Wreikat, Kabilan, & Abdullah, 2014). For one thing, students from rural schools are deprived of the opportunities they deserve. Parents of rural students tend to have jobs with lower occupational status compared to parents of urban students. Students in rural schools are less likely to have access to computers, mobile phones and the Internet at home than urban students (Cartwright & Allen, 2000).

### ***Reading Research on reading in rural areas in Malaysia***

Several studies on schools in rural areas have been conducted in Malaysia (e.g., Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Lin, Mohammad & Ismail, 2016; Marian, Sumintono, & Mislan, 2012; Samat, Ghaffar, Manickam, & Yunus, 2019; Wreikat, Kabilan, & Abdullah, 2014; Yap & Siow, 2016). Three studies are connected to reading and English language learning in rural areas. Asraf and Ahmad's (2003) study was on extensive reading implementation in secondary classrooms in rural areas. Students were provided with graded readers according to their reading levels. Samat, Ghaffar, Manickam and Yunus's (2019) study investigated how multimedia texts and technology could enhance students' comprehension. Whereas Lin, Mohamad and Ismail (2016) compared primary five students' reading abilities from urban and rural schools in northern Malaysia. The researchers claimed that the overall primary five students' reading abilities were below the expected standard. Students from the urban schools scored higher than students from the rural areas.

Wreikat, Kabilan and Abdullah (2014) evaluated the environmental effects on pupils' English language proficiency in six rural primary schools in Sabah. The results show that the learning environment in these schools is not an ideal conduit for effective English language learning to take place. That said, other than the learning environment issues, language teachers are important agents of change such as being innovative and creative in their teaching approaches. Much of the recent literature has not investigated English language teachers' beliefs in teaching reading in secondary schools in rural areas. Table 1 shows the research studies in rural areas in Malaysia.

*Table 1 Research studies in rural areas in Malaysia.*

Asraf & Ahmad, 2003	Promoting reading in rural schools;
Marwan, Sumintono, & Mislán, 2012	Teacher shortage in rural schools
Wreikat, Kabilan, & Abdullah, 2014	Rural learning environment and pupils learning in Sabah
Lin, Mohamad & Ismail, 2016	Tracking students reading comprehension performance
Yap & Siow, 2016	Rural education leadership
Samat, Ghaffar, Manickam & Yunus, 2019	The use of virtual reading comprehension to enhance reading

### ***Supplementing reading materials***

In the English classrooms in Malaysia, the textbook is the main source (Pandian, 2006, Hidayat, 2019). Teachers often use “excessive amounts of textual extracts, to the detriment of full texts.” As a result of this, students might be ill-equipped (Dean, 2015, p. 97).

In language learning, book reading is said to be a major driver of accelerating early literacy. Encouraging book use, particularly authentic reading materials by teachers fosters language development of English Language learners or ELLS. Authentic reading materials are “real-life texts” (Wallace, 1992). They are from the “real-world” which are not created for instructional purposes (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). Authentic texts such as newspaper articles, magazine articles, trade books (a book intended for the general public) are original as the words have not been simplified. A sizeable number of studies have reported that exposing students to real language in a real context benefits L2 reading (Fitriana, Hadijah & Lestari, 2019; Kung, 2019; Seunarinesingh, 2010). For one thing, authentic reading materials related to students’ interests are highly motivating (e.g., Nunan, 1997; Nuttal, 1996; Peacork, 1997). These books engage the interests of the readers. Because the reading materials are appealing, they are good resources to improve students’ English syntax and lexis (Seunarinesingh, 2010). Although the present study was not on vocabulary, it is well worth discussing the importance of growth in vocabulary knowledge. The minimum lexis in a text necessary for comprehension and the vocabulary size a student should possess are always the conundrums among ELL teachers. Reading threshold was first mentioned by Laufer and Sim in 1985. By that they meant a floor (i.e., threshold) of reading comprehension competence. At the beginning, the meaning of the reading threshold was somewhat vague as comprehension difficulty was a complex issue. Laufer (1989) reveals that 95% of lexical coverage is the threshold required to score 55% on a comprehension test. She uses the term ‘lexical threshold’ to refer to the minimal vocabulary of familiar words in a text in percentage and the reader’s vocabulary size needed to understand a text (1991). A decade later, Hu and Nation (2000) claim that 98% is the lexical coverage for adequate comprehension. Like Hu and Nation (2000), Schmit, Jiang, and Grape (2011) also found that 98% coverage is needed if a comprehension score of 70% is expected of the readers. According to Laufer (2013), a 98% lexical coverage would mean approximately six unfamiliar words on a page. Nevertheless, high levels of vocabulary coverage (e.g., 98% to 100%) will not lead to 100% comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is only one aspect of comprehension. Other factors such as readers’ background knowledge, motivation, or interests also contribute to learner’s reading comprehension. Of all these aspects, vocabulary is the most important for comprehension (Schmit, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011).

The present study stems from the lack of resources in teaching reading in Malaysian secondary classrooms particularly in the rural areas. Limited teaching resources affect students' reading abilities. Children in rural schools who are from the lower socio-economic background, also struggle academically. More often than not many of these schools are also in financial distress and may have limited means to pay for printings, buying stationery, or buying reading materials. That said, despite the constraints, teachers are not without a choice. They can decide how they want to teach reading in their classrooms. There are factors that can be controlled by the teachers inside the classroom such as the materials used in class and instructional practices that can leverage students' learning (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011). Language teachers' beliefs and understanding of teaching reading play an important role in their classroom practices and in their professional growth. Teachers' beliefs underlie teachers' planning, teachers' decisions and behaviour in the classroom. Although some studies conducted were on teachers in rural areas, scant attention has been paid to ELL teachers' beliefs and practices in ELL secondary school settings. The next session delineates teachers' beliefs.

### ***Teacher Beliefs***

Teacher beliefs are the convictions that teachers have pertaining to their teaching. Teachers use their own beliefs to understand and act in the context they are in (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2013; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013). Pajares (1992) defined teacher' beliefs as "an individual judgement of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do" (p. 306).

Investigating teacher beliefs help identify teachers' behaviour, teaching methodology and teaching strategies in class towards their students (Li, 2012). It is crucial to examine "teachers' characteristics, their content, and their expression" in that these beliefs shape more about teachers' instructional behaviours than their research knowledge (Turner, Christensen, & Meyer, 2009, p. 361).

Teachers' learning experiences as learners and their prior knowledge also affect their beliefs about teaching and learning (Abdi & Asadi, 2015; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Phipps & Borg, 2009). Studies on teacher beliefs provide insights on the impacts of beliefs have on instructional practices. Several studies have indicated that teachers' pedagogical beliefs could create barriers in language learning and teaching. These beliefs tend to orchestrate and shape their instructional practices in the classrooms (Kuzborska, 2011; Ročane, 2015). Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) reiterate that teachers are tied to their own unevaluated existing beliefs which restrict their capabilities to accept new opinions or ideas. They tend to use their existing beliefs and practices to deflate innovative teaching approaches. According to Kuzborska (2011), it is crucial to encourage teachers to reflect on their existing beliefs so that they are more receptive to new ideas and practices. Borg (2003) claims that teachers' beliefs about language education differ even among teachers from the same schools. In his review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do, Borg (2003) found that more experienced teachers believe grammar should be taught explicitly while less experienced teachers tend to favour grammar to be taught implicitly. When teachers' declarative knowledge about grammar was examined, Borg (2006) found that teachers' knowledge of grammar and grammatical concepts was insufficient. He revealed that teachers who generally emphasised grammar in class mirrored the way they experienced and learnt grammar in the past. He claimed that to a large extent, teachers' knowledge has an impact on how they teach grammar, and their beliefs and practices are not always congruent (Borg, 2003, 2006). This implies that there is a need to investigate teachers' beliefs. Investigating teachers' beliefs helps change the way they teach and learn, resulting in improvement for language learners (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017).

### ***Teacher Beliefs in the ELL Context***

In the existent literature, teacher beliefs in the ELL context is scant. Rahman, Singh and Pandian's (2018) study was on teacher beliefs and CLT. They claim that ELL teacher beliefs were so complex that they were not aligned with their approach to language teaching in the CLT classroom. Also, their stated belief and classroom practices diverged.

Two other studies related to the teaching of reading were conducted in Taiwan and Iran. Chou (2008) investigated university instructors' belief about reading theories and strategies in reading comprehension and the extent of discrepancies or consistencies between their beliefs and their actual employment in their ELL classrooms. Chou's findings revealed the way the instructor's practice in their reading class was in part due to their beliefs about learners, learning and theories. However, the researcher found that there were no significant differences between teacher beliefs and their instructional approach. Other than the questionnaire, Chou also included a self-reported approach which might not fully reflect the actual classroom practices. The research construct of Khonamri and Salimi (2010) was the same as Chou (2008). However, Khonamri and Salimi investigated high school teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices in teaching reading. Data from their study revealed that high school teachers believed teaching reading strategies was of paramount importance in reading comprehension. Yet, their beliefs and their self-reported practices in the classroom were inconsistent. The researchers elucidated contextual factors such as the constraints of time, size of the class, students from diverse backgrounds and language competency, teachers' workload and other barriers could hinder them from enacting their teachers' beliefs. Also, teachers might not be familiar with the right way to teach reading. In a more recent study on teachers beliefs, Rusmawaty, Atmowardoyo, Hamra and Noni (2018) claim that although Indonesian teachers conceive that printed authentic materials such as newspaper, flyers, magazines, maps, or brochures would familiarise students with the real uses of English and also expose them to new vocabularies, textbooks remain the key texts. It appears that teacher beliefs do not align with their real classroom practices. The research to date has tended to focus on teacher beliefs on teaching reading in other settings, there remains a paucity of reading teacher beliefs in the Malaysian context.

The outset of the present preliminary case study was to explore ESL teachers' beliefs in teaching reading in the rural area in order to get a sense of individual discourses that inform teachers' perceptions, judgements and decision-making to choose certain forms of practices in teaching reading. Understanding teacher beliefs and their actual practices in teaching reading in rural schools may contribute to a better understanding of teacher practice and equip them with skills they need for effective reading instruction (International Literacy Association, 2020). Three research questions thus guided this study:

What are the reading materials that are used in class?

What are the actual classroom practices of teaching reading in rural secondary schools in Sabah?

What are teachers' beliefs about teaching reading and students' reading-related problems?

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

Participants for this study were 20 secondary school teachers (5 males and 15 females) from different public secondary schools. These teachers were selected by the District Education Department to attend a one-day professional training workshop in which the researcher was one

of the speakers. The training was held in Kudat, a small town situated 175 Kilometres from the Sabah capital, Kota Kinabalu.

The respondents' teaching experience ranged from less than 1 year to 35 years, with 55% having taught for 5 years or less, 25% having taught for 6–10 years, 15% having taught for 11–15 years, and 5% having taught for more than 15 years (See Figure 1). All the participating teachers taught in either the lower secondary or upper secondary levels.

How many years have you been teaching?  
20 responses

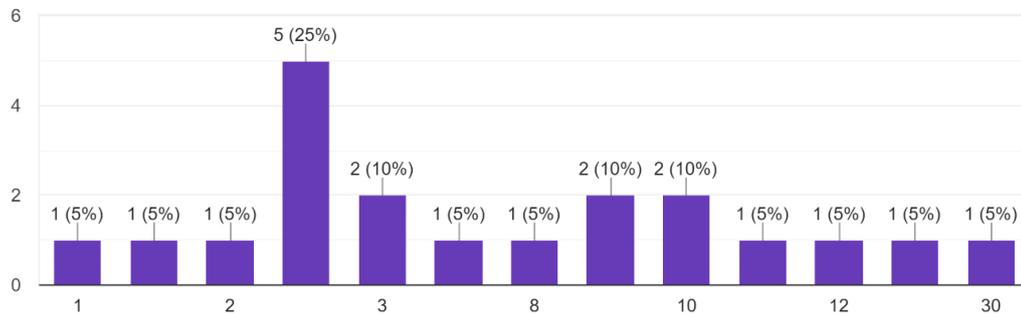


Figure 1 Number of years of teaching

#### **Data collection and analysis**

To understand teachers' beliefs, a questionnaire consisting of three sections was administered. The first section enquired teachers' demographic information such as gender, and years of teaching experience, while the second section comprised 10 Likert Scale questions on teaching reading. Each statement was rated by the level of agreement: 4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. Section Three was an open-ended question concerning the problems teachers faced when teaching reading. The link to the online survey was provided for the teachers before attending a one-day professional development course for secondary English teachers.

Descriptive statistics for each of the 10 Likert scale items were calculated, while the data collected from the open-ended question under investigation were analysed through an inductive and iterative process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

#### **4. Findings**

The present study investigates the participants' teaching practices and beliefs by drawing on data from an online survey.

##### *Q1. What are the reading materials that are used in class?*

70% of the respondents used the school prescribed textbooks to teach reading. Textbooks were the main reading materials. Other than the textbook, 75% also used passages from commercial examination preparation workbooks to teach reading.

Q2. What are the actual classroom practices of teaching reading in rural secondary schools in Sabah?

Reading silently and reading aloud

Almost all the teachers (95%) revealed that they allocated time for students to read silently in a reading class. In the like manner, instructing students to read aloud is also highly favoured (95%). 55% of the teachers preferred student reading aloud to reading silently.

Vocabulary

About 70% of the teachers claimed that they teach vocabulary before teaching reading. Assumably, these words were from the textbook.

Comprehension worksheets

After reading, teachers (100%) would ask their students to do comprehension worksheets and 85% said that their students would answer the comprehension questions individually. Assigning tasks in a group was also a common activity (95%).

Q3. What are teachers' beliefs about teaching reading and students' reading-related problems?

News articles and supplementary reading materials

60% believed that news (print or online) articles are too difficult for their students.

The last research question captured teachers' beliefs about students' reading-related problems. Four categories emerged: vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension and self-efficacy (see Table 1).

<b><u>Vocabulary</u></b>
<i>Lack of vocabulary</i>
<i>They have limited vocabulary skills.</i>
<i>My students are a bit weak and most of them cannot comprehend high frequency words.</i>
<i>Students' limited vocabulary</i>
<i>Students tend to depend too much on the dictionary rather than understand the general idea of what was read</i>
<b><u>Comprehension</u></b>
Understanding of the students
students usually do not understand meanings of unfamiliar text.
they are not able to understand the reading materials that are given to them
<b><u>Pronunciation</u></b>
<i>Students [are] weak in pronunciation</i>
<i>[problems] pronouncing the words</i>
<i>Pronunciation problems</i>
<b><u>Students' sense of reading efficacy</u></b>
<i>Pupils [are] discouraged when they don't understand</i>
<i>Some of the students are not confident enough to read because they do not know on how to pronounce the words</i>
<i>The students tend to be shy because they are so scared of mispronouncing the words</i>

Table 1 Teacher beliefs of the problems secondary students have in reading

As shown by the data in Table 1, teachers perceived lack of vocabularies as the stumbling block to understanding the texts. They believe that limited vocabularies hinder students' understanding of the texts. Somehow, in their belief system, pronunciation is related to comprehension. Weak pronunciation results in poor comprehension.

Teachers also believe that students are shy to read for fear of mispronouncing words. They also think that lack of confidence to read is the result of not knowing how to pronounce certain words.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The intent of this study was to explore secondary school teachers' practices and beliefs in teaching reading in rural schools in Sabah. Although the number of participants in the present study was small, the results are still important and relevant. One of the most interesting findings is that teachers of English are overly dependent on textbooks to teach reading. The findings are consistent with those of Pandian (2006) and Puteh, Zin & Ismail (2016). Obviously, the over reliance on textbooks is due to several reasons. A sizeable number of English teachers are teaching outside their area of expertise. For instance, they are trained as content-area teachers such as Science or History, yet they are assigned to teach English. This is not something unusual in rural schools in Sabah as it is a measure to overcome the shortage of English teachers.

Other than insufficient trained English teachers in rural schools, textbooks are readily available to students and are more cost effective. Another notable point is the fact that textbooks remain a compulsory material in most government schools. Teachers may have the freedom to choose workbooks over textbooks. For convenience, teachers delve deeper into the textbook from teaching forms of grammar, speaking, writing to reading. It is undeniable that the textbook has all the teaching points of the language skills put together in a book. However, it does not stretch the students to move beyond their present lexical threshold as mentioned previously. Vocabulary knowledge is best learnt in the context. That means teachers should introduce the basic vocabulary such as high frequency words before teaching reading. As they read and come across these words in the text later, they will notice how these words are used. Words can only be registered and remembered when students see them several times and use them in the reading activities such as readers theatre, presentations and writing. In other words, teachers have to strategise and authenticate the activities, so that these activities or tasks are linked to their reading. When tasks are meaningful, learning new words takes place.

The impact of using a single source such as a course book in teaching reading exacerbates the already apathetic and disengaged students in the classroom. It is not surprising to hear ELL students commenting that their textbook is boring and dull (Farrell, 2009). Hence, reading a complete reading material such as a news article, a book, a short story or a factual reading write-up is more engaging than an extract or an incomplete passage lifted from a text. This is because a complete text has a beginning and an ending. It hooks the readers so that they keep reading to find out more as the story unfolds. Simply put, choosing a complete story or text over an extract is the key for reading engagement. Students who are apathetic hardly read any English reading materials. It is crucial to select the right reading materials that match the interests of the readers. Topics that are appealing to the young minds such as social media, online games, teenagers' problems and other stories might interest students. To enable teachers to select the right reading materials for the class, consider conducting a needs analysis to capture

information about the intended learners' demographics, characteristics, motivation, interests and so on. That way, teachers could find out more about their students and generate materials that are more appropriate for the target learners.

Table 2 shows teacher beliefs of the problems secondary students display in reading. Clearly, these are not the problems. They are the symptoms or hindrances students exhibit in learning the English Language. Reading problems are not asymptomatic. As soon as teachers believe these are the hindrances, the next step is to find the right medicine for the symptoms. If, on the whole, students did well in the vocabulary inventory test, but their comprehension was the issue, then teach them reading strategies. If on the other hand, they scored below the threshold score or lacked the vocabularies, "it would mean that the class needed more language work" (Laufer, 1985). Teaching vocabulary should be included. Although dated, Laufer's recommendations resonate with ELL educators till today.

It is therefore crucial to regularly provide necessary professional development programmes for all teachers of English particularly those teaching in the rural areas. These professional development interventions could impact teachers' knowledge, teachers' beliefs, teachers' practice, and students' outcomes. Better teaching will result in better students' reading outcomes. Teachers who are reflective on their existing beliefs are more receptive to new ideas and practices as discussed earlier.

Disseminating innovative teaching is one way to foster the sustainability of professional development programmes. For instance, teachers could conduct practitioner action research or reflections in their classrooms and report their findings and reflections in a journal. The dissemination of good practice projects and ideas to a wider audience has more sustainable impact even after the professional development programme ended. This upholds the quality of teachers in terms of their knowledge and competence in teaching reading.

## **6. Limitations**

Implementing effective reading instruction at the secondary schools in rural areas represents an immense challenge. In the present studies, the absence of in-depth interviews and classroom observation limits the generalizability of the results. Also, teachers' self-reported classroom while teaching reading was not included in the present study. Future research should include teacher interviews and classroom observations to gain insights on what secondary English teachers in rural areas do to meet the needs of their struggling readers.

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