

**THE SECONDARY SCHOOL  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE READING CURRICULUM:  
A TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS**

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## **Abstract**

In Malaysia, the issue of weak and non-proficient graduates is a pressing matter. This implies that they are not well-equipped to cope with academic literacy, which is closely related to their language proficiency, as the main medium of instruction at most higher institutions is the English language. At this level, reading is the essence of academic achievement where they are required to read, explain and critically assess lengthy, often complicated academic texts, and process the obtained information either in written or spoken forms (Nambiar, 2007; Levine, Ferenz and Reves, 2000). The problem of reading that arises may be tracked down to the secondary school level, which may due to the inconsistencies and misalignment between the approaches and design with the implementation stage in the classroom. Thus, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of an English Language teacher with regard to the English Language Reading Curriculum in improving students' comprehension ability. Findings will serve as an efficient and operational guide to designing reading curriculum and instruction, as well as a tool that can be used to evaluate a set of curriculum and instruction, specifically in second language teaching and learning, and across subjects in general. It can also be utilised for reviewing or counter-checking of curriculum documents after a certain period of time.

Keywords: reading curriculum, design and implementation, comprehension, secondary school, teacher's perceptions

## **1.0 Introduction**

The issue of Malaysian graduates being weak and not proficient in the English Language has been constantly talked about at the national level. Teachers, lecturers and employers complain that students are way below the expected level of proficiency (Kaur & Thiyagarajah, 1999). In response to this, the government has taken some proactive measures to overcome the problem. For example, the introduction of *Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris* (PPSMI), a government policy initiated in 2003 which intended to ensure

students' mastery in science and mathematics considering the fact that most of the resources are available in the English language. In some way, it is also expected that the implementation of PPSMI would contribute to the improvement of students' command of the language ([www.moe.gov.my](http://www.moe.gov.my)). Another step taken is bringing in native English teachers into the country whereby the Government will recruit 375 native-speaking teachers including from the United Kingdom and Australia to further enhance the teaching of English (The Star, 2010, online). Nevertheless, there is also a more basic problem, which is related to the curriculum, as stated by Prideaux (2003:268) that "The curriculum of any institution is often contested and problematic".

The issue of weak and non-proficient graduates suggests that they are not well-equipped to deal with academic literacy (David & Govindasamy, 2006; Pandian, 2000). This is closely linked to their language proficiency. At most tertiary institutions in Malaysia, the official medium of instruction is the English language, where at that level, reading is the essence of academic achievement. Students are expected to read, explain and critically assess lengthy, often complicated academic texts, and process the obtained information either in written or spoken forms (Nambiar, 2007; Levine, Ferenz and Reves, 2000). The problem of reading that arises may be tracked down to the secondary school level, which may due to the inconsistencies and misalignment between the approaches and design with the implementation stage in the classroom. Thus, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of an English Language teacher with regard to the Form 5 English Language Reading Curriculum in improving students' comprehension ability.

## **2.0 Previous Researches**

The problem of reading comprehension is not unique to only Malaysian graduates. In fact many students experience comprehension difficulties (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 1996; Pressley, 2006a, 2006b). Thus, some students need explicit comprehension strategy instruction (Pressley, 2002, 2006a, 2006b). And, a rational starting point for this discussion is by defining what reading is. It is then followed by a brief review on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is adopted in the Malaysian Form 5 English Language Reading Curriculum.

### **2.1 Reading and the Reading Process**

Involving the writer, the reader and the text, reading is actually a communication process where a reader is seen to perform an active role in a reading process. According to Goodman (1988), reading is a "...psycholinguistic process that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs". Here, it can be understood that there is a necessary interaction between language and thought when reading takes place. Thus, in essence, reading is an intricate process that involves many issues.

What then, does a good reader do? Many researches (Block, 2004; Block & Pressley, 2002; Presslet & Afflerbach, 1995) have identified that skilled readers use more or less the same thought processes prior, while and after reading. Skilled readers will:

(a) adjust a reading goal according to their level of prior knowledge,

- (b) think strategically,
- (c) follow their intentions to the end of a passage,
- (d) monitor their comprehension, and
- (e) reflect on an author's purpose within the constraints of a particular genre and their own reading objective.

(Block & Israel, 2004: 154)

On the other hand, it is also found that less proficient readers fail to adopt the set of skills except if their teachers can successfully demonstrate those thinking processes to them (Israel, 2002; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). At this point, it is apparent that teachers play a crucial role in assisting students build on their comprehension strategies as "Good instruction is the most powerful means of promoting the development of proficient comprehenders and preventing reading comprehension problem" (RAND, 2002, p. xvii). Still, "Comprehension is both one of the most important and one of the weakest areas of instruction" (Bormuth, 1969 cited in Durkin, 1978: 5). Research points out that comprehension strategies should be explicitly taught long term at all grade levels (Pressley, 2006b; Sweet & Snow, 2003; Block & Pressley, 2002; RAND, 2002; Calfee & Patrick, 1995). And, according to Durkin (1978:9), "Ideally, comprehension instruction has transfer value, thus will help children cope with the meaning of connected text not used in the instruction".

Based on the many previous researches, it is obvious that the teacher's role in aiding students' reading comprehension skills is vital. This also reflects the importance of the reading curriculum, as teachers will implement their reading instructions based on the outlined curriculum.

## **2.2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

The Malaysian English Language Secondary Curriculum is one example of a communicative curriculum. According to Richards and Rodgers (2008), it is one of the first attempts to arrange CLT around an arrangement of communication tasks.

CLT is a popular approach world-wide. It originates from the changes in the British language teaching practice in the late 1960s. British linguists at that time felt that the functional and communicative aspects of language were not adequately addressed (Richards and Rogers, 2008). Consequently, many played their roles in establishing CLT, for example, Widdowson, Candlin, Brumfit, Johnson, Hymes and Canale and Swain. Their work was quickly accepted and practised by curriculum developers, language teaching specialists and also governments nationally and internationally (Richards and Rodgers, 2008).

A study by Saad Shawer (2010) found that teachers who understood CLT and managed to materialise its principles into action significantly improved student language learning (cognitive change) and motivation (affective change).

Ratnawati Mohd Asraf (1996) examined the attitudes of ESL secondary school teachers towards the different aspects of the KBSM English language syllabus. She discovered that many teachers felt that the syllabus, in stressing the communicative aspect of the language, does not enable

students to become proficient in the language. The teachers felt that emphasis should be placed on grammar and being able to speak and write grammatically.

In a content analysis study of the Malaysian Secondary EFL Curriculum, Harison Mohd Sidek (2010) discovered that the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum does not conform to the features of a communicative curriculum. Only minimal principle grounding of CLT is reflected in the reading tasks in the curriculum.

In another study, Minglin Li (2010) found that EFL teachers were not following the instructions in the national English curriculum to guide their classroom teaching, but were rather critical to the objectives and requirements described in the curriculum. This shows that there is a gap between the curriculum policy and practical teaching situations. The study suggests that involving classroom teachers in policy making may help the national language curriculum more applicable and implementable.

More generally, Judd (1981) highlights the importance of knowing the role of English in the overall language policy context in a country as it will make it easier to reach sound curricular and instructional decisions. When English language instruction fit the needs of students, their motivation will be higher. This implies that there must be a coherent link between the *design* and *procedure* aspects.

In addition, Hong Wang (2010) revealed a discrepancy between policy-makers' intentions and administrators' implementation. Therefore, it points to the critical role that the department heads as middle-level administrators must play in translating policies into practice.

### **3.0 Research Questions**

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of a secondary school English Language teacher regarding the Form 5 English Language Reading Curriculum in improving her students' comprehension ability?
2. Does the Form 5 English Language Reading Curriculum meet the needs of the students?

### **4.0 Theoretical Framework**

Looking at the history of language teaching, the main concern has been depicted by the search for more effective ways of teaching, whereby the resolution to this is the acceptance of yet another new teaching approach.

In order to function at its most, there is a need to have a comprehensive link between language teaching at the theory and principles level, and also at the procedural stage. Thus, Richards and Rodgers (2008), with modifications from Anthony (1963), propose a model of language teaching method (refer Figure 1). They view approach and method as functioning at the *design* phase. At this phase, the objectives, syllabus and content are established together with the roles of teachers,

learners and also instructional materials. Another phase is *procedure* which is the implementation part. In brief, a method is “theoretically related to an approach, is organisationally determined by a design, and is practically realised in procedure” (Richards and Rodgers, 2008: 20).

Richards and Rodgers’ model indicates that any language teaching method can be examined in terms of the three levels of *approach*, *design* and *procedure*. This coincides with the curriculum development process, which entails:

- a) The careful examination, drawing on all available sources of knowledge and informed judgement, of the teaching objectives, whether in particular subject courses or over the curriculum as a whole.
- b) The development and trial use in schools of those methods and materials which are judged most likely to achieve the objectives which teachers agreed upon.
- c) The assessment of the extent to which the development work has in fact achieved its objectives. This part of the process may be expected to provoke new thought about the objectives themselves.
- d) The final element is therefore the feedback of all the experience gained, to provide a starting point for further study.

(Nicholls and Nicholls, 1972, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2008:248)

This suggests that a curriculum can also be observed using Richards and Rodgers’ model. Hence, this study will look at the Form 5 English Language Reading Curriculum from an English language teacher’s perception as to whether there is a continuity and link between the content of the curriculum with what happens at the procedural level that is the instructional implementation in the classroom. In doing so, the researcher will focus on the *Design* and *Procedure* parts of Richards and Rodgers’ model of Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching.

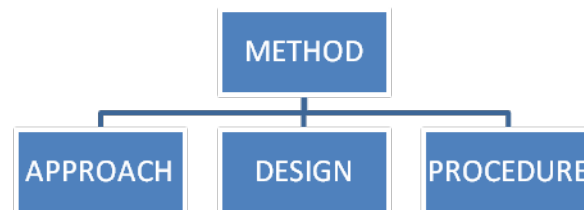


Figure 1: Richards and Rodgers’ (2008) Model of Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching

## 5.0 Methodology

On the basis that Form 5 is the level where students are, prior to their tertiary level education, a Form 5 English language teacher was selected to be interviewed. Past studies have shown that to understand the elements of the curriculum, an approach that includes interviews is very helpful (Mfum-Mensah, 2009; Briggs, 2007; Mohamad Hassan Zakaria, 1997). The subject is a female teacher at a public school in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. She has a Master degree in English Language and is currently holding the post of Head of English Panel at the school. She is also a *Guru Cemerlang* (Excellent Teacher) with 18 years of teaching experience. *Guru Cemerlang* (Excellent teachers) are appointed as role models to be the source of inspiration and motivation to other teachers to jointly compete in raising the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. The existence of *Guru Cemerlang* is expected to be the catalyst for a school to improve its academic excellence and outstanding performance ([www.moe.gov.my](http://www.moe.gov.my)).

A semi-structured interview was carried out, posing open-ended questions and a few prompts to obtain the teacher's views on the Form 5 English Language Reading Curriculum. This was done within the framework of Richards and Rodgers' (2008) model of Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, at the *Design* and *Procedure* levels. Questions were asked based on the two levels in order to obtain data on the teacher's perceptions regarding the Form 5 English Language Reading Curriculum. The interview took approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview. The researcher read the transcript to identify the different categories the teacher (thereafter referred as Madam B) discussed. Descriptive codes were assigned to indicate the explicit patterns that were reoccurring.

## 6.0 Findings and Discussion

Analyses of the data showed that the teacher's understandings and perceptions of the English Language Reading Curriculum could be examined under six categories namely: 1) objectives and approach of the curriculum, 2) criteria of selection, 3) types of teaching-learning activities and role of instructional materials, 4) learner and teacher roles, 5) personal teaching practice and 6) challenges and assistance needed. The sections that follow present a look at each category.

### 6.1 Objectives and approach of the curriculum

For the teacher who was being interviewed, the curriculum was comprehensive in the sense that it covered all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The teacher mentioned many times the ideal but sometimes impractical objectives described in the curriculum, together with suggested activities, which to her defined the curriculum. The teacher interviewed knew about the curriculum specifications and she always kept a copy of it in the teacher's record book for reference. She claimed that the curriculum was well designed whereby the goals and objectives were academically viable but at times were too ideal to be accomplished in practice. Thus, on the part of the teacher, a question of 'how much can I apply?' arose.

The teacher reported to be aware of the CLT approach adopted in the English Language Curriculum. Nevertheless, from her observation, there was not much communication going on in

actual English classes, especially during reading lessons. This might be due to a few reasons like students' passive attitude and also the idea of exam-oriented learning as mentioned by Madam B,

- ... we are aware that it's supposed to be a communicative class, but then as a GC (*Guru Cemerlang*) I sometimes, I do go around looking at teachers, even my own students, but there is not much communication going on... they (students) were very passive.
- ... nowadays not many teachers want to do communicative things... because they want to prepare students for exam...

It showed that although teachers were aware that the curriculum is adopting the CLT approach, they did not fully employ the intended approach as there was exam pressure being put on their shoulder as Madam B further clarified,

- ... the administrators are not going to ask me '... whether your students can speak or not, or did your students have fun or not'. They are going to ask 'what results did you produce', 'How many As did you produce'.

This was further reiterated when Madam B mentioned about literature component in the syllabus, which was initially being aimed at increasing students' interest in reading and appreciation towards the language.

- ... literature is supposed to be learnt, should appreciate the language, which is not happening. Again, it's exam... The ministry has said (to avoid this), we are not going to test on short stories. So, some schools do not teach short stories, because it's not in the exam.

Another vital issue raised by the teacher was that the curriculum failed to meet students' needs as the educational system focused more on the orientation of examination, not really on the quality-orientated system. The foremost priority was to get higher marks, or more A's in order to secure competitive positions at universities. Thus, the idea of 'teaching for examinations' was pointed out very frequently during the interview. Teachers rarely concentrated on the needs of students to master reading comprehension in preparation for tertiary education since they wanted to help students to obtain good marks in examinations.

Although examination was the main focal point, the importance of reading stated in the curriculum was not really portrayed in the SPM examination seeing that the questions set could be answered by guessing, not fully through comprehending the reading texts. This was evident when Madam B pointed out that

- ... for every question, there's indication where to get the answer...
- ... students don't need to write in full sentences... as long as the idea of it is there, they'll get marks...
- ... there's no grammatical concern...
- And when it comes to summary writing, it's like from this line to this line, so you read that line to that line and identify a few sentences that you feel relevant and you write it



down, that's it. Copy, done... so, the importance of reading (comprehension) is not really portrayed even in the exam.

Despite all the misalignment mentioned, Madam B felt that the curriculum was a complete one. Nevertheless, the problem lay in the implementation part by the teachers, who were confined by the examination requirement, and also in the nature of how examinations were set. There seemed to be separate entities of the curriculum, the teacher and the examinations – which were supposed to be coherent, but did not happen in reality. The beautifully crafted curriculum was not in line with the examinations set which resulted in difficulties for teachers to implement the objectives of the curriculum.

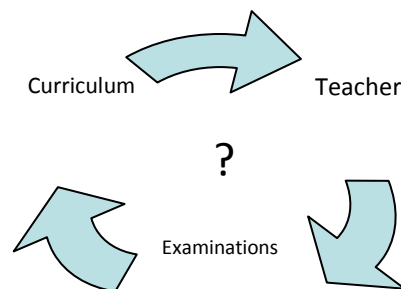


Figure 2: Incoherence between the Curriculum & Implementation (Teacher and Examination)

## 6.2 Criteria of Selection

For Madam B who was interviewed, the curriculum was divided according to themes that were relevant and applicable to students. But she proposed to add more new elements for example, technology, which was an important element for survival in the modern era of information technology.

It was reported too that Madam B also came out with her own reading comprehension materials for her lessons. This indirectly indicated that the curriculum did not state a clear form of criteria in the selection of teaching materials. Due to that, she depended on certain criteria when selecting her own teaching materials, namely the level of students, amount of time available, types of vocabulary and also types of passages. Another criterion was to have a variety of exercises so as to make her classes lively. This could be seen through her responses:

- I need to see whether the class is able to understand what I'm trying to teach them... how much guidance they will need...
- ... how much time frame do I have...
- ... what types of vocabulary, what types of passage...

## 6.3 Types of Teaching & Learning Activities and Roles of Instructional Materials

Regarding the types of teaching and learning materials, the curriculum covered many skills like reading for details, looking for main ideas and many more. There were also project works assigned to students. The reading passages contained in the textbook were a mixture of simple and difficult ones but Madam B explained that she would use them mostly for her good classes

because for her weak classes, she would concentrate more on the exam format. Thus, here it indicated that the examination was not reflective of the textbook, which indirectly showed it did not reflect the curriculum too, since textbook was usually written with the curriculum as the basis.

- ... it's (exercises in the textbook) not reflective of the exam... that's the reason why most teachers don't want to use them (textbook).
- For example, the summary that is given (in the textbook) ... the one in the exam is 130 words, write a summary of 130 words. The one in the textbook is not so.

According to Madam B, most reading passages in the textbook were narrative in nature and some were factual passages, which were suitable for the students. However, the reason why she did not fully utilise the textbook was mainly due to the level of her students and whether the exercises would help the students in the examination. Here, again the focus on examination was seen to be the priority of the teacher.

Then again, Madam B mentioned that it was part of her responsibility to try and use the textbook, at least at the very minimum because to her textbook acts as a base and a guide for teachers to carry out the curriculum. She would improvise the exercises so as to suit the needs of her students. She would also be selective in using the materials available in the textbook. Even so, there were too many chapters to be covered in the textbook, especially for Form five, which was unrealistic to be covered by the time SPM examination was due to take place. Thus, Madam B personally suggested that the number of chapters be reduced.

She added that apart from the textbook, there were many other materials that could be used as input which could be in line with the curriculum specification, namely the internet.

- I feel the internet is the best choice... everything is available there. So if teachers do not use it, it's a waste. There are wonderful lesson plans...

#### **6.4 Learner and Teacher Roles**

Madam B opined that the curriculum and the textbook did match, where both expected students to read and understand reading passages, alongside being active readers. However, it would depend on the teacher of how he or she conducted and modified the reading lessons because the textbook was just a guideline as a whole, and there was no differentiated textbook according to level of students.

- ... they (curriculum developers and textbook writers) are looking as a whole and as one level of students ... there is no book for weak students, a book for average students... it again come back to the teacher, how they want to teach...

The textbook, according to Madam B adopted learner-centred approach where students were encouraged to work in pairs and groups, without depending much on the teacher.

Still, a teacher played a prominent role and had a major influence on students' learning. In her own classes, Madam B might just be a guide or she would lead her students and discuss every single detail of the reading passages. This again would depend on the level of students she had. Madam B stated that as the curriculum was student-centred, she would try her best to get the students to be more active and speak their thoughts. She had the view that teachers should play their part in teaching students reading comprehension by introducing various activities to teach a reading class.

## **6.5 Personal Teaching Practice**

Another notable point that emerged from the interview was teachers' personal practices. Although the curriculum was reported to be comprehensive, teachers had to be resourceful and innovative. Throughout the interview Madam B had always related and reflected on her own personal teaching practices, which were worth taking note of as she is a Guru Cemerlang (Excellent Teacher) in the school. First and foremost, she highlighted that she would have different lesson plans for different level of students of the same form (i.e. Form five). She would stay back at school after school hours and spend time to really plan her lessons.

As mentioned a few times in the earlier parts, Madam B had always believed in preparing lessons based on the level of students, either they were good, average or weak so as to cater for the different needs of each group.

More generally, Madam B was very reflective of her teaching; she would ponder upon the lessons she had delivered – whether the students enjoyed her classes, or was the lessons boring or did she achieve the objectives she set for her lessons.

Apart from that, in teaching reading comprehension, Madam B also would use video clips and suitable lead-in questions to start off her lessons. She would use Youtube and the internet and download suitable teaching materials like videos. This implied that Madam B is an IT-literate teacher, one of the important features of being a good teacher in this modern world. She would also use magazines like Readers' Digest, as well as work book and past years' questions as drilling exercises. More often than not, she would also integrate reading with other skills like writing, listening and speaking. She would make her students answer comprehension questions by asking some high level questions. However, according to Madam B, in the SPM examination, very simple questions were asked except for the last question where it expects students to come out with their own answer or reasoning. There are very few questions of higher level such as inference.

## **6.6 Challenges and Assistance Needed**

There were also some challenges faced by Madam B and other teachers in general.

***Time constraint.*** This main factor was mentioned several times which showed how teachers are constrained by time factor in delivering their reading lessons according to the curriculum specification.

- I would use that (textbook) for my good classes, even with the average class, one or two, not all of them because of time constraint.
- We don't have that much time to do, especially if it's with Form five... I won't be able to cover the past years' questions.
- That can be done with good classes because they are fast, you see. I don't need many lessons... but when it comes to weak classes, it's going to be a failure. I need to guide them. We discuss every single thing, which is time consuming.
- And that is why I think certain teachers don't want to spend time doing it (modifying their lesson plans) because you know, time is very little...
- But that (preparing lesson plans) I don't deny – consumes a lot of time.

***The attitude of students.*** They did not want to read and in some extreme cases, students at the secondary school level still cannot read, and this definitely brought problems to teachers in large classes.

- ... they don't read at home... at home, reading is not enforced.
- They don't have basic vocabulary.
- ... they do surf the internet but maybe only things like facebook, only the things they know what to do. They watch channels nothing to do with English, and if they do, they are with translations...
- I don't know how is it going now down there nowadays. Maybe it's not being emphasised or maybe these students are the very ignorant ones, maybe they only learn during the lesson and when they go home they don't speak the language.

***Pressure of the exam-oriented education system.***

- ... teachers are being pressured on the results so they feel like rather than wasting a double-period doing fun reading with the students, that is not being tested in the exam, I might as well do something that is tested in the exam...

Madam B also hoped that teachers would be assisted in a few aspects of teaching. In relation to the era of IT, Madam B felt that the Ministry of Education should come out with ideas on how teachers could purchase good teaching materials online.

Apart from that, Madam B also believed that teachers need refreshment courses.

- I think teachers need refreshment courses because as we teach, we need ideas, and sharing ideas is the best.
- And I think sometimes here and there we need to give refreshment course to the teachers. Sometimes they are so tired and so bored and so pressured by the exam...

## 7.0 Conclusion

The present study provides an overview of a teacher's perceptions as an implementer of the English Language Reading Curriculum in Malaysia. It reveals that the Malaysian English Language Reading Curriculum, which has been designed around the CLT approach, is to some extent a *divine* document for guidelines, but not fully implementable by teachers in schools. It could be deduced that as a policy document, the curriculum has not functioned as it is envisioned to be in classrooms situations which explains the current problem of reading at higher institutions. Hence, it is hoped that this study may benefit those involved in the curriculum development and examination syndicate, to enhance the teaching and learning processes of reading in the second language, not only among teachers in Malaysia but also world-wide.

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