

# SPIRE Project: Parental Involvement in Young Children's ESL Reading Development

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## Abstract

Realising the clear dichotomy between schools and homes, the Malaysia government has now turned its attention to stakeholders and called for an increase involvement of parents, who are critical in transforming the education system. However, a clear line of demarcation continues to exist between the two prime educators of young children. Schools have yet to fully embrace the concept of active parental involvement, particularly in academic matters and have yet to design formalised programmes that provide avenues for active parental involvement. The six month Smart Partnership in Reading in English (SPIRE) formalised programme, which created a platform for non-native parents to play a more active role in developing early literacy skills in young children, particularly, reading skills in English language, was explored as an option. 25 non-native five year old children, 25 parents and the class teacher were involved in the programme. A rich ESL literacy environment was created both at school and homes by making a wide range of English storybooks and multimedia materials available for the children to be taken home. The parent-teacher partnership scaffold the children's reading development. The teacher reads storybooks in school and the parents at home. Qualitative data gathered via interviews, home visits, meetings and informal conference provided evidence for parents' positive attitudes towards reading English storybooks and towards being involved in their child's reading development, a positive link between levels of parental involvement and reading development, and the plausibility of involving non-native parents through a formalised reading programme. The SPIRE programme explored in the Malaysian context can also be adopted in non English speaking countries for similar purposes.

**Keywords:** parents' attitude, storybook reading, parental involvement, young learners, reading development

## 1. Introduction

The Malaysian government's aspiration to raise the literacy rates to 100 per cent by the year 2020 is apparent in the constant reminders to parents and teachers to help arrest this shortcoming. It has been constantly reminding its citizens on its aspiration to develop good reading habits and improve English language proficiency. Records show that Malaysians read lesser books, i.e. only 8 to 11 books per year compared to developed nations where, for example UK, 16 books are read, on average, per year. Abdul Wahab Ibrahim, Director of the National Book Council of Malaysia, noted "A developed nation is a nation that reads, and until we can reach that average number per year, we will become a developed nation. Unfortunately, we are not there yet, that is why the Government is striving to change the mindset of Malaysians toward books to eventually cultivate a reading culture." And he also added that '... together with the Government, our vision statement is 'A book in the hand of every Malaysian citizen by 2020' (Afdeza, 2014).

Efforts to develop reading habits among Malaysians continue. One of the Malaysian National Philosophy of Education' (A Vision of the Malaysian Smart School, 1997) initiated the establishment of smart schools to increase participation of stakeholders [including parents], with focus on individuals, education and society. The New Smart School Curriculum, which focuses on four sub-areas, including English, aims to improve language proficiency among Malaysian. The fifth goal ascribes a renewed parental role and responsibility:

Parents can play a major role in helping Smart Schools provide individualised education for students ... This task will go beyond monitoring the child's progress, and providing guidance, motivation, and counsel, it will require familiarity with new educational process, a willingness to assist with ... developing teaching-learning ... and assessment materials ... (MSC Flagship

Application, 1997: 5)

Realising the clear dichotomy between schools and homes, the Malaysia government has now turned its attention to stakeholders and called for an increased involvement of parents, who are critical in transforming the education system. ‘The involvement of all these stakeholders will create a learning ecosystem that reinforces the knowledge, skills, and values taught to students at school’ (MEB, 2012). The Minister of Education II stressed ‘The learning process is not confined between the teachers and students, but is part of an ecosystem which includes parents and the community (Keynote address, 2014; Beh, 2013). However, a clear line of demarcation continues to exist between the children’s prime educators. Parental involvement in Malaysian pre-schools appears to be rather limited. The existing definition of parental involvement appears to be confined to Parent-Teacher Association, and primarily in non-academic activities, such as attending school events, raising funds, or attending parent teacher meetings. It is apparent, however, that most parents are already involved in other informal and affective manners, such as buying activity of story books, reading and telling stories or assisting with homeworks at home (Vellymalay, 2012). They are already scaffolding their children learning process at home. This form of implicit involvement in children’s early education is clearly an untapped resource. Despite numerous calls for schools to involve parents more actively and vice versa, no clear structured programme is in place for this purpose. The call remains a call, with no conscientious effort made to link the two parties. Thus, we drew up a formalised parental involvement reading programme to bridge schools and homes and link these two entities in educational activities. The Smart Partnership in Reading in English (SPIRE) project was thus conceptualised for this purpose. Section 4 provides a brief description of the project.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Reading Readiness Era

The concept of reading evolved from the 1920s, when the term reading readiness was first explicitly applied to reading, as highlighted in a Report of the National Committee on Reading in the United States. Krogman (1963) as cited in Leeper et al. (1968) explained the term readiness as ‘... a ‘best-time’ for initiating a specific task situation ...’, which implies the ‘the time at which a child is capable of learning to read ... about six years and six months’ (Smith & Chapel, 1970). This reading readiness paradigm that held firm that children must be ‘ready’ to read greatly governed the most influential study by Morphette and Washburne (1931: 503):

... By postponing the teaching of reading until children reach a mental age level of 6½ years, teachers can greatly decrease the chances of failure and discouragement, and can correspondingly increase their efficiency

Thus, the proponents of the ‘doctrine of postponement’ (Durkin, 1982) believed that the passing of time automatically resulted in readiness and stressed that ‘we [should] wait until the time the youngster is ready’ (Russell, 1966). However, since customarily formal reading instructions were introduced to a child in kindergarten or in the first grade, age of six was acknowledged as the chronological age for reading readiness in a child. In waiting for the ‘teachable moment’ (Havighurst, 1953 cited in Russell, 1966), i.e. ‘a time when a beginning can most profitably be made to the task of teaching children to read’ (Hunter-Grundin, 1979), formal teaching was dismissed and a preparatory programme, which developed ‘for “unready” children, which was to last until they became “ready” (Durkin, 1982) was developed. Visual and large motor skills were systematically taught to these children who enter pre-schools at fairly similar levels of development and with pre-requisite skills of reading readiness.

### 2.2 The Shift towards Emergent Literacy and Storybook Reading

Since 1970’s, the readiness paradigm, which Walsh (1989) argued, is ‘mystical and sentimental’ faced ‘unified challenge [s]’ (Teale & Sulzby, 1986), discredited and remodelled (Hunter-Grundin, 1979; Schickedanz, 1982; Steward, 1985). More studies began to show evidence of early readers who started readings before the ‘appointed’ age. Durkin’s (1966) landmark study on *Children Who Read Early* found that young children aged five or below had learned to read. Hunter-Grundin (1979:12) noted that

... A cloud of ambiguity surrounds the whole issue of reading readiness and its relation to the teaching of reading. ... during all stages of growth ... the child is *maturing* and *learning*, through a natural interaction with his environment. The adults who are his first ‘teachers’, usually his parents, enable and facilitate the child’s learning ...

The reading readiness doctrine disregarded the pertinent role of social interaction, i.e. children acquiring literacy from adults, who play a crucial role in the children’s development of new knowledge through conversations and

purposeful engagements in literacy events, which Vygotsky (1978) upheld, was not accredited. Durkin (1982) stressed that ‘the key role played by non-school factors was clearly underscored’.

There was a gradual change in the term used to describe L1 literacy development. Clay (1966) cited in Teale and Sulzby (1988) introduced the notion of ‘*emergent*’. She reasoned the notion of ‘*emergent*’ connotes development. Teale and Sulzby (1988:261) explained

... It is indeed not reasonable to point to *a* time in a child’s life when literacy begins. Rather at whatever point we look, we see children *in the process of becoming literate*, as the term ‘*emergent*’ indicates.

Children are actively constructing and reconstructing literacy in a rich physical and social environment and not in a vacuum. One of the emerging patterns in all the works mentioned earlier was the children’s experience of adults reading and re-reading stories. Mason and Sinha (1993) explained that most emergent literacy research is compatible with this viewpoint which depicts this paradigm, i.e. literacy construction and the pivotal role of social interaction in shared literacy activities.

Research on emergent literacy (Kantos, 1986; Glazer & Burke, 1994; Laminack, 1990) presented empirical evidence for the link between storybook reading to children at home and emergent literacy development. A plethora of research evidence (Durkin, 1966; Clark, 1976; Smith, 1978; Taylor, 1983; Wade, 1984; Baghban, 1984; Mason & Allen, 1986; Wells, 1986; Teale & Sulzby, 1987; Hiebert, 1988; Morrow et al., 1990; Karweit & Wasik, 1996; Reese, Sparks, & Leyva, 2010; Saracho & Spodek, 2010; Collins, 2010; Lefebvre, 2011; Gillanders & Castro, 2011) highlight reading storybooks or reading aloud to children as the key component in facilitating the early literacy acquisition. It is said to be one of the best ways to bring children into the world of literacy (Holdaway, 1979; Trelease, 1995). While Butler and Clay (1979) asserted ‘there is no substitute for reading and telling stories to children, from the very earliest days’; Zakaluk (1998) contended it is an ‘ideal routine for fostering reading development’.

### 2.3 Parental Involvement in Literacy Development

Since the 80s and 90s, several researchers (Becher, 1983; Heath, 1988; Rosenthal & Sawyers, 1996); Wade & Moore, 1998) have strongly put forward the case for parental involvement. Sharing of storybooks with parents is seen as one of the early literacy experiences, which orientates children to literacy (Scollon & Scollon, 1981) and lays the foundation for literacy in early years (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Wade & Moore, 1998; Hannon & James, 2013). Teale (1984) and Ninio (1986) viewed early involvement and book-sharing experiences as an induction ‘into the contracts of literacy’ (Snow & Ninio, 1986).

Synthesised and published research findings also highlight the significance of reading to children and the importance of home as the key environment for literacy development (Becher, 1983; Potter, 1986; Adams, 1990; Wiener & Cohen, 1994). Tracey and Morrow (2002) asserted, ‘the quality of a child’s home environment exerts an extremely powerful effect on his or her literacy development’. Studies have highlighted that not only the reading of storybook is pertinent, but the kind of interaction is equally pertinent (Snow, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Sensenig (2012) explained that the use of formats and routines (Bruner, 1985) also facilitated scaffolding. The verbal interactions with adults offer children a direct channel of information that simultaneously enhances literacy development (Heath, 1988). Bus, IJzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995) highlighted that the frequency of reading storybooks is also equally pertinent in attributing to reading development.

Numerous reading programmes (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1999; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Saracho & Spodek, 2010) that involved native and non-native parents in young children’s reading development recorded evidence to signify the importance of storybook reading to usher the children into the world of literacy. This evidence shows a positive link between parental involvement and literacy/reading development (Marcon, 1999; Jeunes, 2005; Roberts, Jergens, & Margaret Burchinal, 2005; Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff & Ortiz, 2008; Smetana, 2005; Sénéchal & Young, 2008) and clearly indicates the significance of the home in literacy development.

Explicit parental involvement, i.e. being part of the education ‘ecosystem’ in Malaysia is a new concept and novel research area yet to be conceptualised by schools. To date, research on parental involvement in Malaysia appears to focus on understanding the teachers’ perception towards parental involvement in primary schools (Nor & Jennifer, 2001; Azizah Abdul Rahman et al., 1993, 1996; Radzi, 2010) or parental involvement at home, which is linked to their socioeconomic status (Vellymalay, 2012). There appears to be little research on a formalised reading programme that bridges schools and homes by engaging parents, who are an ‘undertapped resource for improving children’s language and literacy’ (Reese, Sparks, & Leyva, 2010). As mentioned earlier, the SPIRE project was thus designed and carried out for this very purpose of bridging home-school and engaging

parents as a part of the education ‘ecosystem’ in developing young children’s literacy, particularly, reading skills.

### 3. Malaysian Education Structure

The Malaysian education structure follows the 1 informal and 6-3-2-2 formal pattern, i.e. pre-school (1 year), primary (6 years), lower secondary (3 years), upper secondary (2 years) and post secondary (2 years). While informal education in pre-schools/kindergartens can begin at age 3, formal instructions in the primary schools begin at age 7. Malay Language (Bahasa Melayu) is the medium of instruction in national preschools, as well as primary and secondary schools. English Language, the official second language, is taught as a second language at all levels. Albeit, national preschools adopt the national curriculum, private preschools do not have to abide by this requirement. Generally, workbooks and activity books are used to teach English language and sight vocabulary approach is adopted to develop reading skills in public preschools. Readers in private preschools conduct academic reading lesson rather than tell or read storybook.

### 4. SPIRE Project

The six month SPIRE project conceptualised in six stages (See Appendix), which, among others, had aimed to bridge the school and homes, i.e. to provide a platform for more active parental involvement in academic matters, to foster positive attitudes in parents towards storybook reading and to develop early English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy (reading skills) in the children. A private preschool consented to participate in the project, which involved 25, five-year old multiracial preschoolers in the ‘Jasmine’ class, their parents and their class teacher. (Details of the participants are present in section 4.0). The school adheres to the national curriculum and follows a strict timetable with formal lessons for each subject, including English language. It adopted the sight vocabulary approach in developing reading skills, but storybook reading was not embedded in the timetable. Neither a formalised reading programme nor a programme that involved parents in academic matters was in place. Parents, the children’s prime educators, were only invited to school concerts.

The project, which commenced in the first quarter of the year made it possible to ‘unlock’ ESL literacy learning from school to the home. It created a rich ESL literacy environment, both in school and at home. A wide range of reading materials (363 array of storybooks: graded, non-graded, board, pop-ups, flap, shaped, easy-to-read, traditional literature, poems, nursery rhymes, etc. and 94 multimedia materials: CDs, DVDs) were made available for the teacher to read to the children at school and for the parents to read to the children at home. Most of the reading materials were kept in the Strawberry Club that was set up as a resource center during the project. The children were taken to the club once a week to read the storybooks and to take home reading materials of their choice. A reading corner was also set up in the classroom, and the handful of old and tattered book were replaced with the new storybooks and constantly substituted. At home, it created opportunities for storybook events, i.e. for parents to induct their children into the ‘world’ of storybooks.

Prior to the commencement of the project, the teacher, who was of opinion that reading storybooks is not a vehicle to develop literacy, adopted the reading readiness approach. She was initially skeptical as she felt that the children were not ready to read. She also adopted the sight vocabulary approach to develop vocabulary and storybooks were used only to teach shapes, objects, colours or moral values. However, during the project, she began embedding storybook reading to the children whenever possible (before/after formal lessons, before assemblies) and began reading as frequently and repeatedly as possible. She began bridging the school and homes and involving parents as co-educator. She began working ‘hand-in-hand’ with the parents to develop the children’s literacy. In scaffolding the storybook reading events at home, she demonstrated how to read interactively during the home visit and urged parents to frequently and repeated read interactively to the children.

The 25 parents, who had never been involved in any formalised reading programme were invited to the launching of the project. During the launching, the researcher explained the project and encouraged the parents to form a partnership with the school, to work hand-in-hand with the teacher to develop their child’s literacy skills and to be involved in developing their child’s literacy skills at home. They were told that being a non-native speaker will not hinder them from being involved. Positive outcomes of previous research projects involving non-native speakers were highlighted to convince parents that their involvement can positively affect the children’s literacy/reading development. Parents were encouraged to read to the children for at least 5 to 10 minutes a day, to make storybook reading a routine and to adopt the storybook reading format (Bruner, 1985) when reading to their child.

The 25, 5 year old children in the Jasmine class were also briefed on the project. A literacy bag, in which they took home their storybooks and other multimedia materials added, to their ‘pride’ of being in the project. The teacher commented that the ‘children were very proud and were showing off their bags to the other children in school’ (TJ). A visit to the Strawberry Club roused their interest when they first saw the numerous books on the

shelves and the multimedia materials that they could view on the computers. The teacher noted, ‘they felt that *they were in the “Disneyland” storybook world*’ (I/Celine). This got the children all excited about the project and they looked forward to Thursdays to be in their ‘Disneyland’: ‘... They *looked forward to Thursday* too ... it seemed like a special day to be in the *Strawberry Club* ... all the interesting books for them to choose from ... (TJ).

All three parties, i.e., the teacher, parents and children signed a PACT (See Appendix) to seal their partnership and commitment to develop the children’s reading skills. Various communication channels, including, newsletters, meetings, informal conferences, record cards and home visits, parents were deployed to keep the communication lines open for the teacher to scaffold and encourage the parents to be involved in developing the children’s reading skills. Upon the request of both parents and children, the project, which was initially planned for six months was extended for another two months. (See Madhubala, et al., 2014 for more details of the project).

## **5. Methodology**

### *5.1 Participants*

#### 5.1.1 Children

Of the 25 children, 10 children were in their second year of informal schooling and within the age range of 5 - 5.5 years old (15 children) and 5.5 - 6 years old (10 children); mean age being 5.7. The largest group comprised children whose heritage language were Mandarin (10 children), followed by Malay (8 children), Tamil (5 children) and English (2 child). Except for the two children, whose heritage language was English, the other children spoke mainly in their heritage language. Their English language proficiency was limited to a ‘one or two word(s) level’ before the project. The teacher noted that they would begin a sentence with ‘teacher’ and complete it in their dominant language, for example, ‘Teacher, saya nak keluar’ [Teacher, I want to go out]. All 25 children were non-readers before the project. The teacher noted that the first year children were learning to recognise the letters in the alphabet and that their sight vocabulary was limited to the standard ‘word list’, where they learnt to represent each letter, for example, ‘A’ for apple, ‘B’ for boy, ‘C’ for cat. Only the second year children were able to recognise limited words beyond the ‘list’.

#### 5.1.2 Parents

Of the 25 parents who were involved in the project, 15 are literate in English, seven are less proficient in English and three displayed limited ESL literacy, i.e. unable to read or write in English, but are able to recognise environmental print. Only two parents spoke only in English and 13 parents spoke at varying levels of proficiency, in English and in their heritage language. 10 parents mostly used their heritage language (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) at home. Only four parents received tertiary education, 15 parents received secondary education and six did not undergo formal education. Except for two parents who were unemployed, the rest were all employed (Professionals: 3 parents; Non professional (Business): 17 parents; Clerical: 2 parents). They belonged generally to the average working-class group.

Of the 25 parents, only six parents read storybooks to their child; however, at varying frequencies (1-2 times a week: 4 parents; 3-4 times a week: 1 parent; Everday: 1 parent) and in different languages (English storybooks: 3 parents; Malay storybooks: 2 parents; Tamil storybooks: 1 parent) before the project.

### *5.2 Instruments*

The multi-method approach, employing various measures, including teacher journals, parent interviews, record cards, meeting turnouts, weekend activities and home visits were adopted to triangulate data on the parents’ attitudes towards storybook reading and their involvement in the children’s reading development. These measures were also adopted to examine the influence of the interpersonal interactions, physical environment, and emotional and motivational climate (Leichter, 1984) on the children’s reading development at home. A questionnaire was also administered to gather background information of the participants.

### *5.3 Data Analysis*

Cohen, Manion and Morrison’s (2007) guidelines were adapted to analysis the data gathered from the interviews:

- 1) Transcription: Once the interviews were completed, the interview tapes were transcribed. A bilingual, i.e. both in English and Malay language instructor verified the translations for comments made in Malay language.
- 2) Bracketing and phenomenological reduction: Attempts were made to deliberately understand what the parents were saying, rather than what we were expecting them to say.

- 3) Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole: The entire tapes were listened to and transcripts read in order to elicit a context for the emerging specific units of themes.
- 4) Delineating units of meaning relevant to research questions: The general meanings were then reduced to units of meaning that were relevant to the research questions.
- 5) Eliminating redundancies: redundancies and repetitions of same words were eliminated.
- 6) Clustering units of meaning: Units of meanings that had common themes were clustered together.
- 7) Determining themes from clusters of meaning: Central themes included parental attitudes towards storybooks, parental involvement and children's reading progress.
- 8) Returning to the participants with the summary and themes: Parents were asked to peruse the summaries.
- 9) Composite summary: A summary was made of each interview for reference during the write-up.

## 6. Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in the study

- 1) To what extent did the project foster positive attitudes towards reading English storybooks and being involved in developing the children's reading skills at home?
- 2) What were the levels of parental involvement in developing the children's reading skills at home?
- 3) What were the effects of the levels of parental involvement in the children's reading development?

## 7. Results

The findings of this study are presented in response to the research questions. Pseudonyms are adopted to conceal identity of participants: (P/Grace) refers to comments made by Grace' parent (P); (RC/Safa) refers to Safa's parent's comments on her record card (RC); (WA/Ravi) refers to Ravi's parent's comments in his weekend activity (WA) form; (TJ) refers to the classroom observations in the teacher's journal (TJ); (HV/Veron) refers to the visit to Veron's home. Quotes are verbatim and where parents spoke in the Malay Language, translations are made in parenthesis. In order to adhere to the permitted length of the paper, a maximum of four quotes is cited.

### 7.1 Parents' Attitudes towards Storybook Reading and Being Involved

In answer to the first research question: To what extent did the project foster positive attitudes towards reading English storybooks and being involved in developing the children's reading skills at home? The parents' attitudes and behaviours towards reading English storybooks prior to and during the project reflected the changes in attitude. Prior to the project, it is not surprising that most parents displayed unfavourable attitude towards storybook reading. Less than five parents reported awareness and understood the significance of storybook reading, although, they still did not read to their child, or sporadically read storybooks in other languages:

- ... I know it is *important to read* English storybooks ... but I hardly read to them ...  
(P/Gary)
- ... *Sometimes*. I will read the Malay storybooks ... (P/Nurul)
- ... Ada baca buku cerita tapi dalam bahasa Tamil tapi tak selalu... [Yes, I read storybooks, but in Tamil, but *not always*] ... (P/Selva)

Disinterestness in storybook reading among parents was also one of the reasons for not reading to their child: '... saya tak minat nak baca buku cerita, jadi saya tak baca kepada dia [I am not interested in reading; therefore, I do not like reading to her] (P/Nurul).

Most of the other parents adopted the reading readiness approach:

- ... saya tak baca dulu sebab terlampau awal, dia masih kecil lagi [I did not read because it is too early, she is still young ... (P/Sara)
- '...saya tak baca sebab dia masih kecil [I don't read to him because he is still young] (P/Qarim).

On the other hand, some parents expressed preference for workbooks or activity books over storybooks:

- ... saya beli banyak [I *buy lots of*] workbook ... buku tulis dan activity lebih bagus, sebab buku tulis dia akan tulis ... writing books and activity books are better, because writing books, he is able to write]... (P/Chiew Wen)
- ... [Swee Kiong's] mother *doesn't think that storybooks are important*. (HV/Swee Kiong)

The change in attitudes was evident by the second month. Parents who were initially skeptical about reading

English storybooks, adopted the reading readiness approach and began reading to their five year olds. The teacher confirmed the change in most of the parents' attitudes towards storybook reading:

... Most of the parents *are positive about reading storybooks* and *they now note that it is an essential activity to help their children read* ... about 70 to 80 per cent were beginning to be positive towards reading English storybooks by the second month ... they did not before the project. Many have told me when I visited them at home or I meet them after school that *they have started reading English storybooks* ... (I/Celine).

Parents too confessed a change in attitude.

... Last time I don't think story reading is important, but *now is quite important* ... Yes, I do buy storybooks now, before I buy activity books only ... (P/Chee Sze)

They cited various reasons for reading to the children, and it is not surprising that the most common as well as the main reason was the project itself. They read because the children took books home:

... without this project and our interest also won't be that eager ... now must read the story ... Now birthday or any occasion, I tell them it's better if you give storybooks. Her birthday also she received a few storybooks... (P/Syafa)

... sebab project ini, tiap-tiap minggu ada buku jadi banyaklah saya baca ... [because of this project, there are books every week, so I read more to her] ... (P/Sara)

... *during the project* I read ... memang I terpaksa layan dia, sebab dia selalu bawa buku pada saya dan suruh baca ... (P/Farah)

The second most common reason most parents reported was that the children insisted they be read to. Words, such as insist, pester, forced to and bug are indications of the children's persistence to be read to:

... [Hiew Jian's] mother thinks that *activity books are important*, but *her daughter insists on storybooks* to be read to her ... (HV/Hiew Jian)

... [Ravi] will be *bugging me* to read... mummy read read... (P/Ravi)

... dia tak kira masa ... masa kita sibuk dia bawa ... afternoon atau morning dia bawa buku untuk di baca ... [I am *forced to read* to her because she will always be asking me to read. No matter whatever time ... even when I am busy ... afternoon or morning she will take a book for me to read to her] ... (P/Farah)

... [Swee Kiong's] mother *doesn't read storybooks* last time. But now, she reads to him *because he pesters her to do so* ... if not he will throw tantrums ... (HV/Swee Kiong)

The third common reason was parents wanted their children to learn the English language. The apparent change was noticed in the perception of most parents who (before the project) viewed activity books as a means of developing ESL literacy; they now viewed the storybook reading as a medium to learn English:

... *I now read storybooks to let her learn English* ... (P/Syafina)

... I read because I see *the importance of this language*, and I want her to learn it... (P/Nurul)

...saya mahu dia fasih dalam Bahasa Inggeris ... I want *him to be fluent in English* ... (P/Qarim)

Some other common reasons included: to develop vocabulary, construct sentences, inculcate positive reading habits and read for pleasure:

... English storybooks improve my son's vocabulary ... (P/Ravi)

... storybook helps constructing sentences ... From there they will get idea from storybooks, if straight away activity book ... like ideas and sentence structures not so good ... Kalau dia tak baca buku cerita, macam kakak dia bila membuat karangan membina ayat tidak dapat berkembang ... [If she doesn't read storybooks like her sister, she is unable to construct sentences well in compositions] ... So, storybooks lebih [much] better ... (P/Syahina)

... kita hendak menggalakkan dia supaya rajin membaca ... [I want to *cultivate the reading habit* in her] ... (P/Sara)

... I read to her because I want her *to enjoy reading* ... (P/Grace)

## 7.2 Levels of Involvement

The second research question addressed the levels of parental involvement, i.e. 'What were the levels of parental

involvement in developing the children's reading skills at home?" Although all parents maintained that they were involved, they demonstrated contrasting ways influencing their child's ESL literacy development. Two broad levels of parental involvement, i.e. high (14 parents) and low (11 parents) levels were evident.

The high-level parental involvement group frequently 'created' storybook events. Interpersonal interaction in shared storybooks reading experiences were more frequent than the low-level involvement group. They read more frequently, i.e. every day. Albeit, being encouraged to read for 5 to 10 minutes a day, the high-level involvement groups spend more than the suggested duration:

... hari-hari belum lagi sempat salin baju sekolah dah suruh membaca kepadanya ... kami baca lama ... sehingga 1 jam [she wants me to *read to her ... everyday* even before she changes her uniform, she will ask me to read to her ... we read for a long time ... for 1 hour] ... (P/Syafa)

... Yes, I read to him *every day* ... he will always bring the book that he has borrowed for me to read to him ... (P/Ravi)

... anak saya suka membaca oleh itu saya membaca kepadanya lebih dari satu jam ... [my child loves to read that is why I *read to him more than one hour*] ... (P/Selva)

... di rumah ada baca untuk adik perempuan ... [... *at home, I read to my younger sister ...*] (Yasim)

The high-level parental involvement group was also more involved in the project itself. They made it a point to attend all meetings. They reasoned that it was a platform to exchange ideas and gain knowledge on storybook reading techniques:

... I like the idea of coming to these meetings *because they "mock" me...*, tells me to listen and look at the other parents, they spent more time with their children. *And to see how other parents interact with their children.* Nice to see them all together. It was easy going, it was nice. We watched videos on storybook reading techniques which were very useful. It got me doing things because other parents are doing it ... (P/Ravi)

... I come for all the meetings ... they were useful to us. We *can gain some knowledge*. My sister doesn't know the reading technique to read to her child. With these meetings, *at least we can share...* (P/Nurul)

... Listening to other parents' attitude towards their child's reading has been *an eye-opener for me ...* (P/Grace)

As for the low-level parental involvement group, six parents appeared to be involved occasionally and five rather passively. The six parents who displayed occasional involvement, read occasionally to their child, i.e. between three and four days in a week for a duration of 20 to 30 minutes:

... Her auntie will read to her for about 20 to 25 minutes three or four days in a week ... if her father is around, he will read to her ... (HV/Christie)

... Kami kerja ... so kita tak banyak masa untuk membaca kepada dia ... but I ada make a point to read to him ... tiga atau empat hari ... lebih kurang 20 ke 30 minutes ... [We are working ... So we do not read much to him] ... but I make a point to read to him ...three or four days ... About 20 to 30 minutes ... (P/Yasim)

However, the five parents who were passively involved read sporadically to their child, i.e. between one and two days in a week at irregular intervals, and for a shorter duration. The children had 10 minutes or lesser storybook encounters:

... saya baca storybook sesekali ... dia selalu merayu kepada saya untuk baca ... memang patut kita buat tetapi I tak tetap masa ... ada masa saja I cerita ... satu atau dua hari seminggu ... kadang-kadang 6 hingga 10 minutes [I read to Qarim sporadically ... he always pleads to me to read to him ... we should read to him but I do not have a fixed time ... I read only if I am free ... once or twice a week ... sometimes 6 to 10 minutes] (P/Qarim)

... lebih lebih two to three minutes saja ... dia ada minat ... sia selalu desak saya baca kepadanya tetapi I saja yang tak ada masa ... [...] perhaps two to three minutes only... she is interested ... she always insist I read to her, but I am not free ...] (P/Syafina)

This low group of parents was found to be less involved in the project, particularly in terms of attending meetings. Limited time, no one to mind younger siblings (despite child minding services were made available) or

caring for an aged mother-in-law were used as excuses or reasons for their poor attendance:

- ... I attended only the first meeting because time doesn't permit ... (P/Syafina)
- ... saya tak datang meeting sebab kena jaga mother-in-low.... [I can't attend the meetings because I have to look after my mother-in-low ... (P/Chiew Wen)
- .... Nobody to 'jaga' [look after] this small one [youngest daughter] (P/Jeya)

Although having limited literacy in English or being busy were cited as factors for limited involvement, these parents engaged some other members of the family, i.e. siblings, cousins, maids:

- ... [Wong Yen's] father doesn't know how to read in English ... so *his elder brother will be reading to him* ... and he seems to be enjoying it ... he doesn't mind who reads to him as long as someone is there to read to him ... (HV/Wong Yen)
- ... [Chiew Wen's] *cousin* will be reading to [Chiew Wen] because her mother doesn't know how to read in English ... so [Chiew Wen] will be waiting patiently for her cousin to come back from work in the evening to read to her ... (HV/Chiew Wen)
- ... No time ... I no read, so maid read to her ... (P/Chin Han)

Some parents commented that their involvement was crucial in developing their child's reading skills:

- ... As a parent I was glad to participate, when it comes to reading to my children ... I know that parents too play a part to see progress in our children ... (P/Gary)
- ... I think parents co-operate than you can see the results ... if parents don't read to their children then their child won't be able to read, but like this I read a few months only with [Nurul], she can read ... should have a time-table on story reading about 10 to 15 minutes a day ... she will be very fluent in her reading ... if we [parents] put more effort, she will have a better foundation ... (P/Nurul)

As mentioned earlier, Leichter's (1984) criteria were used to examine the influence of interpersonal interaction, emotional and motivational climate, and physical environment on the children's storybook events at home. The following section discusses these criteria in relation to the parental involvement in the children's reading development. The first criterion is interpersonal interaction. The type of social interaction during storybook reading appeared to correspond to the levels of parental involvement. Children, whose parents displayed high-levels of involvement, experienced more interactive storybook reading encounters, had more story discussions and negotiated meanings with their parents. There emerged formats, i.e. read the book first, then, discuss the story, discuss the meaning and end with a question and answer session after their shared storybook moments:

*... read together with my son and explain the story ... discuss it with my son the word 'groupalump' ... difficult to understand for beginning, but later it is a simple story a lot of imagination things to think ... after reading the story, discuss it with his mother and brother ... I explain the meaning of the words ... later I ask him some question, which is at the back of the book ... (RC/Selva)*

*... The Caterpillar fight – dapat baca and perlu dibantu dengan perkataan sukar ... saya baca dulu dan dia ikut kemudian ... saya bincang bersama beliau-tanya dia soalan dan dia boleh jawab. Kemudian dia abaca sendiri ... [she is able to read and is assisted with difficult words ... I will read first and then she reads along ... I will discuss the story with her–then we read together ... we discuss together and I will ask her questions. She is able to answer. Later she reads by herself ...] (RC/Syafa)*

*... [Nurul's] mother will ask her daughter to comment on the story read together ... asking her what will happen next ... pointing at the print together as they read ... laughing together at funny parts of the story ... (HV/Nurul)*

The children whose parents displayed low-level of involvement, however, experienced less interactive storybook reading encounters, had fewer discussions and talk around the story:

*... [Swee Kiong's] mum reads very quickly to her son because she is always rushing to work ... and her son doesn't allow her to go to work unless she reads to him first ... she doesn't really have any discussion on the stories that she reads to him ... (HV/ Swee Kiong)*

*... [Priya's] mother flies through the book ... she does not discuss the stories even if her daughter*

wants to ... she says she is tired by the time she comes home ... (HV/ Priya)

... Like [Priya's] mother, [Syafina's] mother just 'flies' through the story without even explaining what the story is all about ... she just wants to do it fast, since her daughter pesters her ... she is busy with house work ... (HV/Syafina)

The second criterion is emotional and motivational climate at home. The high-level parental involvement group created a more favourable, emotional and motivational climate at home. They displayed more positive attitudes towards being involved and were more supportive of their child's ESL literacy development, which is demonstrated in their enthusiasm and commitment to read to their child. It was also a routine, i.e., parents supporting and motivating the children to read:

... My daughter, if she brings back the video as soon as she comes down from the school bus, she will want to watch. So I have to sit with her to watch the video because I have to know the story, in order to write in the record card. If she brings a cassette, I don't have a radio, my radio spoil. So I have to sit in the car with her, let it on to listen ... If I'm pounding chilly and my daughter hears a song and ask me to sing along, and I will sing. I will be the singer and her father will be the storyteller. I will read first, then we will listen to the tape, how the story is read in the tape ... her sisters also read to her when they are home ... in the beginning she doesn't want because the book have so many words ... then I say to her never mind, I read first, you listen ... after that she reads the words herself because the story is interesting ... then words that she doesn't know she will ask ... then she will carry on reading ... (P/Syafa)

In these homes, weekend activities were social events:

... We made the five ducks ... my girls and I had fun ... singing the duck song and moving the little puppets ... [Grace] enjoyed being the mother duck. Thank You! ... (WA/Grace)

... Kami sama-sama membuat project 'growing vegetable tops' ... Tiap-tiap hari-hari menanya bila carrot ini hendak tumbuh ... [We carried out the project 'growing vegetable tops' together ... every day she inquired about the carrot]... (WA/Syafa)

The low-level of involvement group, on the other hand, displayed less favourable emotional and motivational climate at home. They offered fewer opportunities for storybook events or social contexts for the children to be involved in ESL literacy related-activities. Their children's story reading experiences were also less 'pleasurable'. It was a formal lesson, rather than reading for pleasure:

... I see that some parents do not read to their child for enjoyment ... they even force their child to read or to do spelling test of words in the storybooks ... (TJ)

... [Priya's] mother doesn't read to her ... she doesn't give her any encouragement in reading ... she treats reading as a lesson and not as an enjoyment ... (HV/Priya)

The third criterion Leichter (1984) outlined is the physical environment. Once again, the high-level parental involvement groups were found to provide a richer physical ESL literacy environment by making available English materials:

... [Syafa] has a reading corner where she has lots and lots of storybooks ... she even has a set of Mickey Mouse books with tapes that cost about RM2000.00 ... all her books are kept neatly on the bookshelf ... the walls around the reading corner are also filled with posters ranging from alphabet to simple words ... (HV/Syafa)

... [Nurul] has lots of books around the house ... there is a bookshelf and books kept in shoeboxes, old bags and in a newspaper rack ... they have books loan from the public library, from her mother's school library and books that are bought from book sales (nursery rhyme, storybooks, puzzle books) (HV/Nurul)

Not surprisingly, the home environment of the low-level parental involvement group provided limited ESL literacy related materials that were available or readily accessible to the children:

... [Syafina's] house doesn't have any educational charts or storybooks or reading corner because she has thrown it away ... thinking it will be messy ... but she says that she will start buying books for the children ... (HV/Syafina)

The children whose parents displayed low-levels of involvement were mostly 'read to' by other members of the family or maids. Limited literacy in English or being busy was cited as reasons for low involvement:

*... [Chiew Wen's] cousin will be reading to him because her mother doesn't know how to read in English ... so he will be waiting patiently for her cousin to come back from work in the evening to read to her ... (HV/Chiew Wen)*

*... maid baca kepadanya [my maid reads to her] ... I no read to her ... I just let the maid read to her ... during the holidays ... I try my best to guide him ... I also don't know how to read English ... I cannot explain in English there are so many words, if Mandarin I can, my English not very good ... (P/Hiew Jian)*

### 7.3 Effects of Levels of Parental Involvement in Reading Development

The third research question is ‘What were the effects of the levels of parental involvement on the children’s reading development?’ The effect was obvious - varying levels of parental involvement had varying levels of effect on the children’s reading development. Before the project, all 25 children were non-readers and only a few recognised some words beyond the word list. At the end of the project, albeit, all the children displayed progress in their reading skills, their progress was closely linked to the levels of involvement and support received by their parents. The children, whose parents displayed high-levels of involvement made better progress than the children whose parents demonstrated low-levels of involvement. Parents of 16 children who showed high involvement, were confident print readers and were eventually teaching/ reading to others including pets!:

*... [Selva] is at the stage of print reading ... He doesn't feel tense when asked to read aloud. If he comes across a word he doesn't know he tries to guess it or tries to sound the words that are familiar with some key words that looks alike. And if he still doesn't know, he will ask for my help ... [Chin Han, Christie, Nurul, Christie, Syafa, Ravi, Grace, Akhil, Selva and Sara] are at the stage of print reading too ... they are reading with a more natural intonation ...more confidence because they can read aloud to their friends ... some children are teaching their friends how to read and point out if they read the word wrongly... (TJ)*

*... I am proud that my son can now read the storybooks .... he is very confident ... can read the whole book himself ... I very happy ... (P/Akhil)*

*...[Ravi] feels very special ... because he can read now ... he is very confident and proud of himself ... he feels he is different from his brother ...he now reads to his younger sister ... (P/Ravi)*

*... I nampak dia baca pada kucing kesayangannya [I saw her reading to her pet cat] ... (P/Sara)*

The children, whose parents displayed low levels of involvement made slower progress, i.e. they were at different stages of reading-at pretend reading or memory reading and needed assistance:

*... Some of the children are still pretending to read ... [Syafina, Swee Kiong, Priya, Jeya, James] ... [Qarim] will “read” to his friends and they will discuss the story that he is “reading”. He is at the stage of pretend reading ... [Chow Wen] is still at memory reading, “reads” very fast ... uses the picture cues to help her with her “reading” ... after “reading” she will share and discuss the story with her friends ... [Charlene] loves to ‘read’ ‘The Ginger Bread Man’ ... and [Veron] who also read from memory ... will also choose a book that is simple to remember ... and says that she can read ... [Qarim] will “read” to his friends and they will discuss the story that he is “reading”. He is at the stage of pretend reading ... these children will ask for their friends who are readers or me to read to them... (TJ)*

*... my son reads by looking at the pictures but reads from memory ... but sounds like he is reading the book ... (P/James)*

*... saya tahu dia tak tahu baca, but di pura pura baca ... [I know she cannot read, but she pretends to read ... (P/Priya)*

The substantial difference in reading progress clearly corresponded positively to the storybook reading experiences at home, which is also linked to being involved in their child’s reading development.

## 8. Discussion

Two specific limitations of this study, particularly in terms of the data gathered in the interviews are acknowledged. Firstly, the responses may not be reflective of actual ‘happenings’ at home. Although, it can be argued that parents may try to please the interviewer and may not reveal ‘truthful’ information, it may not be so. In fact, they were very frank. It is quite clear they were not trying to please the interviewer when they readily ‘admitted’ not being involved actively, i.e. in reading to their child. Secondly, the data is limited to the information the parents provided and of which they can recall in retrospect. They may not be able to give a

comprehensive picture of their child's ESL knowledge skills and behaviours at home. However, the home visits complements the teacher's comments, which gives a better representation of the children's ESL literacy development in school and at home.

The findings of this study provide supporting evidence for the plausibility of involving non native parents through a formalised reading programme in developing young children's reading skills. Consistent with the Morphette and Washburne (1931) proposition, the Malaysian parents in this study were also postponing the teaching of reading skills until the children were capable of learning to read, i.e. at 6½ years. As Durkin (1982) noted, they were proponents of the 'doctrine of postponement' and were predominantly developing the children's pre-reading skills through activity books, which was favoured over storybooks. The SPIRE project helped dispel the teacher and parents' notion of the 'teachable moment' (Havighurst, 1953 cited in Russell, 1966) and orientated them towards emergent literacy. As Scarborough and Dobric (1994), Wade and Moore (1998), Hannon and James, (2013) expounded, the children's prime educators lay the foundation for literacy development, particularly reading skills through storybook book events. Some parents, who perceived activity books as a medium to facilitate literacy development were eventually convinced that reading storybooks is the key component in facilitating the early literacy acquisition. As Scollon and Scollon (1981) stated, they are responsible for orientating the children towards ESL literacy and scaffolding their reading development.

Similar to studies by Lonigan and Whitehurst (1999), Marcon (1999), Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), Jeunes (2005), Roberts, Jergens and Burchinal (2005), Arnold (2008), Sénéchal and Young, (2008); and Saracho and Spodek (2010), this study found the positive association of storybook reading, parental involvement and literacy development. Parents' positive attitude towards storybook reading and involvement attributed to the children's induction into the 'contract of literacy' (Snow & Ninio 1986). The findings of this study is consistent with findings highlighted by Reese, Sparks and Leyva, (2010), Saracho and Spodek (2010), Collins (2010), Lefebvre (2011), Gillanders and Castro (2011). However, the children's 'contract into literacy' varied, as reflected in their parent's levels of involvement, i.e., high or low (occasional/passive) levels of involvement. As Bus, IJzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995), Snow (1994), and Tracey and Morrow (2002) highlighted, the children's reading progress was governed by the frequency, social interaction and quality of home environment. The high parental involvement group read more frequently, in fact for extended hours, and read interactively as well as provided physical, emotional and social support. There was evidence of formats and routines (Bruner, 1985) in their children's storybook experiences, i.e. reading together/reading aloud, discussing stories, negotiating meaning, questioning and answering sessions, and reading became a daily activity at home. Their children, who had pleasurable reading encounters made accelerated progress in their reading and within six months, they were confident and independent readers. As parents scaffolded their children's reading development, they in turn, began scaffolding their siblings at home and the non-readers in school.

The low level parental involvement group who read either occasionally or sporadically, held lesser social interactions and did not provide as much physical, emotional and social support as the high level parental involvement group. Some parents cited limited ESL literacy as the reasons for being less involved. The three parents who cited limited ESL literacy did not prevent them from entirely not being involved. Their involvement was subtle, i.e. they engaged other members /extended family members to create the emotional and motivational climate. The other two reasons for being less involved, i.e. being busy or tired after work may have accounted for their lack of patience, which could have attributed to lesser storybook events, shorter storybook reading experiences and lesser pleasurable storybook encounters for the children. The lesser supportive home environment resulted in a more gradual progress, i.e. the children were at the 'memory/pretend' reading stage at the end of the six months. Perhaps, a longer duration of the project may possibly result in the children eventually readers.

It is noteworthy to highlight the non-association between a native speaker and the reading progress. Being native speakers did not give the children an added advantage over the non native speakers. Reading progress was closely tied to the levels of parental involvement. The two native speakers (James and Veron as noted in the teacher journal), whose parents displayed low levels of involvement progressed to only pretend/memory reading at the end of the project.

## **9. Conclusion**

Consistent with the numerous reading programmes (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1999; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Saracho & Spodek, 2010) that highlighted the significance of storybook reading and the positive links between parental involvement and literacy/reading development (Marcon, 1999; Jeunes, 2005; Arnold, 2008, Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Roberts, Jergens, & Margaret Burchinal, 2005), this study also found similar links. Although all

the children encountered the same storybook experiences in school, it was the additional parental support that made a remarkable difference in the children's reading development. Concurring with Reese, Sparks and Leyva (2010), the Malaysian parents, who were an untapped resource for improving literacy, clearly played an important 'element' in the reading ecosystem. Albeit, the number of children involved in this study was small, i.e. 25 children, the findings of this study provide evidence for the plausibility of involving non-native parents in a formalised reading programme as part of any education ecosystem in any part of the world. What mattered in this reading programme was the attitudes, interest and motivation towards storybook reading of non-native parents, the type of home support, i.e. interpersonal interaction, and emotional and motivational climate created at home, and the levels of involvement of parents in scaffolding their children's reading habits and development at home, which is evidently linked to the children's reading progress. The proposed SPIRE reading programme explored in the Malaysian context can be adopted, especially in non English speaking countries where English is a second or foreign language. Non-native parents can be involved and in partnership with schools, can usher young children into the world of ESL or EFL literacy development, even before formal instructions.

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