Encouraging ESL/EFL Reading Among Lower Proficiency Students at the Tertiary Level: The Use of Graded Readers

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian tertiary students are reluctant readers of English texts, a condition which can impede the development of their English proficiency. In any ESL/EFL reading programme, particularly programmes for lower proficiency students, it is essential to provide materials that students can comprehend without difficulty. This paper discusses the respective roles of authentic and simplified texts in ESL/EFL settings, and observes students' perceptions towards the use of graded readers. 28 Malaysian undergraduates (remedial English language learners) read a series of graded readers from the Oxford Progressive English Readers collection, and questionnaires were utilised to record their perceptions. Primarily, it was found that: 1) perceptions regarding the graded readers were encouraging, and 2) using suitable reading materials can be beneficial, particularly in terms of developing a more positive attitude towards reading in English. The findings provide better direction for the implementation of reading programmes, and are relevant to both language teachers and course planners.

INTRODUCTION

Providing time for substantial or extensive reading (ER) is essential, for it remains one of the more useful language learning strategies available to language learners, be it for vocabulary learning, the development of reading fluency, or the improvement of reading comprehension and writing skills. Sheu (2003) observed that research over the years has underscored the positive effects of extensive reading on language learning for different age groups and in different ESL/EFL settings. Therefore, although ER is an approach less travelled (as put forth by Day and Bamford, 1998), it remains one that we cannot afford to ignore. The following observation by Krashen (1993) encapsulates just how crucial reading is to the development of language proficiency:

> "Reading is good for you. Research supports a stronger conclusion,
> however: Reading is the only way, the only way we become good

readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers." (p. 23)

In ER settings, the provision of input that learners can comprehend without much frustration should be of foremost concern. According to Day and Bamford (1998), who are among the leading proponents of ER, reading materials should fall within the students' linguistic competence. They also elaborated that "Dictionaries are rarely used while reading because the constant stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult." (p. 8)

This then prompts the question as to whether one should use authentic or simplified texts. On one hand, authentic texts are considered superior language learning tools but are potential setbacks for learners who are not ready for them. On the other hand, while simplified texts can be more useful for weak learners, they have been found to be poorly written and suffer from both language and content shortcomings.

Adequate Comprehension

The use of unsuitable reading materials – texts that contain too many unknown or unfamiliar words – is likely to hamper comprehension and demotivate learners. In addition, lexical development is also curbed with the use of texts that are dense with words unknown to the learner. Take, for instance, the following example:

> "The filthy vagrant sprawls himself on the curb, utterly dazed to the world, unable to grapple with the severity of the transgressions that surround his being. His vagabondish lifestyle over the years having finally caught up with him, he feels incomprehensibly powerless and comes to the realisation that life is eccentric – almost grotesque – and often a confusing entwinement of hope, humour, absurdity, fear, and chastisement."

The text above may be comprehensible to learners with a relatively good grasp of the English language and even if they were to encounter several unknown words, it is likely that they would possess enough existing vocabulary knowledge to successfully infer the meanings of these words. In contrast, remedial English language learners who are already struggling to cope with the language are unlikely to be able to comprehend much of the text.

Meara (1996) posited that "All other things being equal, learners with big vocabularies are more proficient in a wide range of language skills than learners with smaller vocabularies" (p. 37). Laufer (1992) suggested that a vocabulary knowledge of 3,000 word families is sufficient for a good understanding of general English texts such as novels. Hirsh and Nation (1992), however, advanced a higher estimate of 5,000 word families as an adequate level.

According to Waring and Nation (2004), word knowledge provides the basis for comprehension and a vocabulary size of 2,000 word families is proportionate to a reader knowing 80% of the words in a text, which means that one word in every five words – approximately two words in every line – are unknown to the reader. A higher rate of unknown words incapacitates readers, hampering them from successfully guessing the meanings of unknown words through contextual clues and also compromising their understanding of the text at hand. Nation (2006), in

a study on the vocabulary size needed for typical language use, was of the opinion that it is necessary for a reader to possess a vocabulary size of around 8,000 to 9,000 word families in order to effectively read materials such as novels and newspapers.

Authentic and Simplified Texts

The provision of comprehensible input is crucial in any ESL/EFL reading programme, particularly those catering to lower proficiency students. According to Day and Bamford (1998), most reading materials are too difficult for second/foreign language learners to cope with because of their limited linguistic knowledge. Therefore, although the use of simplified texts goes against the belief of purists as far as language learning is concerned, it is clear that this is both a practical and logical solution since exposing learners to materials that are too challenging can only hamper their efforts at reading; this can consequently demotivate them as well as nurture a negative attitude towards reading in the target language.

Proponents of authentic materials, however, disagree. As Williams (1984) put forth, "if the learner is expected eventually to cope with real language outside the classroom, then surely the best way to prepare for this is by looking at real language" (p. 25). The 'cult of authenticity' basically argues that the quality – and complexity – of materials written for native speakers make them better language learning tools in comparison to simplified materials (Day & Bamford, 1998). Yet, the definition of 'authentic' seems to vary widely, from any material not specifically produced for language teaching (Nunan, 1989) to those written for native speakers which are neither edited nor abridged (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), to texts that are shortened and slightly adapted (Walter, 1986).

Essentially, authentic materials, however defined, are potential setbacks for individuals who are not ready for them. Rivers (1981) cautioned that learners who are exposed to materials more challenging than their existing ability may have their confidence diminished. Similarly, Williams (1983) pointed out that using ungraded materials too soon often causes students to suffer from unintended effects. In making the pertinent choice of reading materials for language learners, these potential outcomes should not be overlooked.

Designed as simplified, readable texts for second/foreign language learners, graded readers use controlled vocabulary and grammatical features that are structured according to stages of increasing difficulty (Wan-a-rom, 2008). This provides ideal lexical coverage conditions for different elementary and intermediate levels of competency (Waring & Nation, 2004). Additionally, such texts are also contextually enriched to assist lexical inferencing (Nation & Wang, 1999; Wodinsky & Nation, 1988).

There are three types of simplified materials: 1) texts with ideas restated in simpler form and language, 2) texts with form and language generally retained (but certain difficult words or structures are replaced with simpler ones), certain segments possibly reordered for clarity and complex concepts sometimes elaborated on, and 3) texts written specifically for second language learners (Day & Bamford, 1998).

As graded readers are simplified materials, some parties maintain that they are not appropriate for language learning. While it is true that simplified materials can be poorly written, uninteresting, bland and even stilted (Day & Bamford, *ibid.*), Hedge (1985) noted that there are also graded readers of good quality available: "What a simplified or graded reader can do, and many succeed in doing, is to present a well-written story which keeps the interest of the learners and motivates them to go on reading." (p. 21) See also Nation and Wang (1999) and Hill (1992).

The following are excerpts from the story *Frankenstein* (authentic and simplified), exemplifying that simplification need not necessarily result in low quality output.

Original text:

"It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs." (Mary Shelley, first published 1818; excerpt from online edition, p. 58)

Simplified version/Oxford Progressive English Readers (OPER):

"On a stormy night in November, I finally finished my task. The body was built. I collected all my instruments around me so that I might bring life to the creature that lay stretched out in front of me. I worked harder than I had ever worked before. I tried again and again to bring the dead mass to life, but nothing happened. It got very late. At one o'clock in the morning, everything was quiet except for the sound of rain being blown against the windows. My candle was nearly burnt out, but I would not stop working. Then, suddenly, in the dim light, I saw the dull, yellow eye of the creature open! The creature breathed hard and a tremendous shudder moved all through its body." (Syllabus design and text analysis by David Foulds, 2007, p. 22)

In essence, the use of authentic texts is largely suitable for advanced readers while the less proficient are more suited to the use of simplified materials. The ultimate goal is certainly the ability to manage authentic texts at a comfortable level, but one must understand that learners are only able to process text competently at or proximate to their current level of linguistic ability.

Research Problem

Despite its benefits, reading remains largely unpopular among Malaysians. According to Mohamad Jafre, Pour-Mohammadi and Low (2011), the National Literacy Survey (2005) reported that Malaysians, on average, read just two books per year. Meanwhile, Nor Shahriza and Amelia (2007) noted that the Malaysian National Library (2006) found a deterioration in the nation's literacy rate. Attention has also been drawn to the issue of non-reading among Malaysian students; Ambigapathy (2000) reported that around 80% of Malaysian university students have been found to be reluctant readers of both English and Malay materials, and that they rarely read beyond the need to pass their exams.

The matter of a lack of reading in English among our tertiary students is not much helped by the fact that extensive reading still lacks presence in Malaysian tertiary education (Normazidah, Koo, & Hazita, 2012; Gopala et al., 2009). According to Ruhil et al. (2014), extensive reading is

"particularly absent in tertiary education in Malaysia" (p. 109) and advanced that in order to enhance students' proficiency in English, it is pertinent that ER be given due consideration for inclusion into tertiary-level English language courses.

Consistently, Malaysian graduates' prospects of employment have been adversely affected by their lack of proficiency in English (Malaysia Budget 2015; Human Resources Online, 11 April 2011). Time and again, studies have reaffirmed that Malaysian graduates fall short of industry standards with one of the central themes being their incompetency in the English language (Lim, 2011; Ambigapathy & Aniswal, 2005).

Research Objective and Significance

Although graded readers have generally been observed to be advantageous for language learners, effective implementation of their use still depends largely on the discernments of those who stand to benefit the most from it.

It is hoped that the findings presented here will provide better direction for the implementation of future reading programmes catering to lower proficiency students at the tertiary level. The findings are therefore of significance not only to remedial English language learners but also to teachers, course planners and syllabus designers.

Furthermore, the findings are relevant to the Malaysian government's aims to improve the English language proficiency of our nation's graduates (Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025; Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025; New Straits Times, 3 September 2014; National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007).

Research Questions

1) What is the average receptive vocabulary size of the participants?
2) What is the frequency of reading in English among the participants?
3) What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the graded readers used?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 28 remedial English language learners at a Malaysian public university were involved; the participants – Malaysian undergraduates between the ages of 19 to 22 years old – were registered for a preparatory English language proficiency course at the university reserved for those grouped under the lower proficiency MUET (Malaysian University English Test) bands of 1 to 3.

Instruments

Nation and Beglar's (2007) Vocabulary Size Test was utilised to gauge the participants' existing receptive vocabulary size in order to determine the most suitable graded reader level at which to start them. This measure helps to ensure that assigned materials are not beyond students' linguistic competence. The online version of the test (printable with scoring guide) is available at

http://www.lextutor.ca/tests/levels/recognition/1_14k/. Sample items from the test are appended (Appendix A).

Seven graded readers from the OPER series were used, published by Oxford University Press. They are listed below according to title (level), original author, and syllabus design-text analysis author(s) (year):

1) *David Copperfield* (Level Three) / Charles Dickens / David Foulds (2005)
2) *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories* (Level Four) / Robert Louis Stevenson / David Foulds (2007)
3) *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (Level Four) / Jules Verne / David Foulds & Luxfield Consultants (1992)
4) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Level Four) / Oscar Wilde / L.A. Hill & David Foulds (2007)
5) *Frankenstein* (Level Five) / Mary Shelley / David Foulds (2007)
6) *Pride and Prejudice* (Level Five) / Jane Austen / Katherine Mattock & David Foulds (2007)
7) *Dracula* (Level Five) / Bram Stoker / L.A. Hill & David Foulds (2008)

Care was taken to select titles covering a wide range of themes/topics to facilitate interest and reading enjoyment, as suggested by Day and Bamford (1998). The final selection covers different subject matters, ranging from poverty and psychological disorders to love/romance, horror, mystery and adventure. In order to monitor the participants' reading, the instant book report measure was incorporated. Designed based on Bamford's (1984) template, the report requires between five to ten minutes to complete (see Appendix B).

Finally, questionnaires were utilised to record the participants' frequency of reading in English as well as their perceptions regarding the graded readers used.

Procedure

Each participant sat for the Vocabulary Size Test prior to the start of the reading program. The results revealed an average receptive vocabulary size of approximately 3,300 word families, indicating Level Three (3,100 word families) to be the appropriate graded reader level for preview reading. Preview reading essentially allows learners the opportunity to first familiarize themselves with a particular style or genre. The synopsis of each story was also made available to the participants and briefly discussed prior to the reading of each book.

Based on Nation and Wang's (1999) suggestion, the participants were allocated one week for the reading of each graded reader (see also Bamford, 1984). At the end of the program, the questionnaires were administered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What is the average receptive vocabulary size of the participants?

The results of the Vocabulary Size Test are as follows:

Table 1. Score Breakdown and Mean

Word families	n	M	SD
3,100	1		
3,200	4		
3,300	10		
3,400	9		
3,500	3		
3,600	1		
	28	3,342.86	110.31

Table 1 indicates the average receptive vocabulary size of the participants to be approximately 3,300 word families with $M = 3,342.86$ word families ($SD = 110.31$). It is to be noted that this is well below the recommended level of 10,000 word families, a magnitude which may be necessary for students to cope with the complexities of tertiary study in a second/foreign language (Hazenburg & Hulstijn, 1996).

Research Question 2: What is the frequency of reading in English among the participants?

Table 2. Frequency of Reading in English

Apart from the storybooks (graded readers) you read during the research, how often did you read other English reading materials (for example, novels, newspapers, magazines and comics)?	
Never	14.3%
Rarely	71.4%
Occasionally	10.7%
Often	3.6%
Very often	0%

Table 2 shows that apart from reading the assigned graded readers, most of the participants (71.4%) read in English only rarely (1-5 hours per week) while 14.3% indicated 'Never' (0 hours per week), 10.7% indicated 'Occasionally' (6-10 hours per week) and 3.6% indicated 'Often' (11-15 hours per week). None of the participants read in English very often (16-20 hours per week).

Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the graded readers used?

Table 3. Perceptions Regarding the Graded Readers Used

Questions/Items	Yes	No
1. Did you attempt to read the storybooks (graded readers) assigned to you?	100%	0%
2. Did you finish reading each graded reader assigned to you?	100%	0%
3. Did you enjoy reading the graded readers?	89.3%	10.7%
4. Would you say that the graded readers covered a wide range of topics?	100%	0%
5. Would you say that the graded readers were interesting to read?	89.3%	10.7%
6. Would you say that the graded readers were informative (you gained new knowledge from the readings)?	78.6%	21.4%
7. While reading the graded readers, did you understand what you were reading?	92.9%	7.1%
8. While reading the graded readers, did you have to guess the meaning of unknown words?	100%	0%
9. Were there enough contextual clues in the graded readers to help you guess the meaning of unknown words?	92.9%	7.1%
10. In comparison to other types of English reading materials, would you say that your reading rate was faster when you read the graded readers?	92.9%	7.1%
11. Was the duration (one week) given to you to finish reading each graded reader sufficient?	100%	0%
	Easy	**Difficult**
12. Would you say that it was easy or difficult for you to follow the plot/storyline in the graded readers?	89.3%	10.7%

Referring to Table 3, all of the participants indicated that they attempted and finished reading the assigned graded readers, found the selection to have covered a wide range of topics, and acknowledged that the one-week duration for the reading of each graded reader was sufficient. All of the participants also noted that they had to guess the meaning of unknown words while reading the graded readers, with 92.9% indicating that there were enough contextual clues within-text to help them do so.

A majority of them also enjoyed reading the graded readers and found them interesting as well as informative. Almost all of the participants (92.9%) indicated that they understood what they were reading and that in comparison to other English materials, their reading rate was faster with the graded readers. Furthermore, a total of 89.3% of the participants found it easy to follow the plot/storyline in the graded readers.

Table 4. Graded Readers' Usefulness for Developing English Proficiency

Question/Item	Yes	No
Would you say that reading the graded readers was useful in helping you improve your English (especially your vocabulary knowledge)?	89.3%	10.7%

Referring to Table 4, 10.7% of the participants indicated 'No'; the reasons given were centered on their disinterest in the stories. Meanwhile, 89.3% of the participants indicated 'Yes' and some of their responses in the open-ended field are as follows:

1) "It is interesting and I can understand the words."
2) "I can understand all stories. It's very good to help me improve my English."
3) "Because the story of the books easy to understand and fun."
4) "I can learn a lot from the books, especially new words. Now I like English books."
5) "I like the stories and can know many of the words and so can learn more."
6) "Increase my confident speaking with people in English. The books good."

In view of the findings, it can be concluded that the use of suitable reading materials can benefit remedial English language learners at the tertiary level, particularly in terms of developing a more positive attitude towards reading in English. As evident from the initial findings, most of the participants (71.4%) admitted to reading English materials only rarely. This is attuned to the findings of previous research on the habits of Malaysian university students with respect to reading in English (see Inderjit, 2014).

It is unfortunate that our students do not read extensively in English as it remains one of the more useful approaches available to ESL/EFL learners for linguistic development (Krashen, 1993) and in view of the negative feedback concerning and repercussions (e.g., unemployment) due to the current state of Malaysian graduates' English proficiency, it is time to consider incorporating effective reading programs into our English language proficiency courses at the tertiary level.

The implementation of such a program; however, entails careful planning and consideration, specifically with regards to providing comprehensible input and facilitating reading enjoyment so as to ensure a perpetuation of the reading process which will in turn benefit the readers.

In terms of providing comprehensible input, the administration of a pre-reading vocabulary size test can be helpful. In the present study, Nation and Beglar's (2007) Vocabulary Size Test was utilized and the results showed an average receptive vocabulary size of approximately 3,300 word families. *David Copperfield* (Level Three/3,100 word families) was used for preview reading, followed by titles from Level Four and Level Five. In order to facilitate interest and reading enjoyment, care was taken to select titles covering a wide range of themes/topics.

The participants' perceptions regarding the graded readers from the OPER series are encouraging. Almost all of the participants (92.9%) noted that they understood what they were reading and that there were enough contextual clues within-text to facilitate lexical inferencing,

alluding to the importance of pre-reading vocabulary size testing and in accordance with Waring and Nation's (2004) postulation that word knowledge provides the basis for comprehension.

Drawing on Eccles' (1983) observation that subjective task values such as enjoyment or interest can encourage task performance, Day and Bamford (1998) emphasized the use of comprehensible texts covering various themes to facilitate readability, interest and reading enjoyment. In the present study, all of the participants reported that they finished reading each graded reader assigned to them and that the selection covered a wide range of topics. Also, most of them reported that they enjoyed reading the graded readers and found them interesting, informative and easy to follow. Additionally, almost all of the participants noted that their reading rate was faster when reading the graded readers as compared to other types of English materials.

Despite 10.7% of the participants noting their disinterest in the stories, it is encouraging that a majority of the participants (89.3%) indicated that reading the graded readers was useful in helping them improve their English especially in terms of lexical knowledge. This is an element of import as researchers generally agree that vocabulary development is a crucial part of mastering a second/foreign language (Schmitt, 2008).

RECOMMENDATION

Given that 1) authentic texts are unsuitable for weak learners, 2) simplified ones have been deemed bland and stilted, and 3) Malaysian university students rarely read in English, it is useful to know the feasibility of using graded readers from the OPER series among Malaysian remedial English language learners at the tertiary level.

A list of suggested protocols is provided as follows (Figure 1) to facilitate the implementation of a graded reading program in ESL/EFL settings whereby the teaching/learning period covers at least nine consecutive weeks:

Guided Extensive Reading (GER)

Week 1
Pre-reading test:
Vocabulary Size Test/VST (Nation & Beglar, 2007)
Available at http://www.lextutor.ca/tests/levels/recognition/1_14k/

Week 2
*Level Three (3,100 word families)
Suggested title: *David Copperfield*
Teacher distributes graded readers to students and briefly discusses the story's synopsis.

*A different level may be used, depending on the VST scores

Guided Extensive Reading (GER)

Week 3
Level Four (3,700 word families)
Suggested title: *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*
a)   Teacher collects previous week's graded readers and distributes
      the instant book report.
b)   Teacher collects the reports, distributes present week's graded
      readers and briefly discusses the story's synopsis.

Week 4
Level Four
Suggested title: *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*
Steps a) and b) are repeated.

Week 5
Level Four
Suggested title: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
Steps a) and b) are repeated.

Week 6
Level Five (5,000 word families)
Suggested title: *Frankenstein*
Steps a) and b) are repeated.

Week 7
Level Five
Suggested title: *Pride and Prejudice*
Steps a) and b) are repeated.

Week 8
Level Five
Suggested title: *Dracula*
Steps a) and b) are repeated. In Week 9, Week 8's graded readers are
collected and the instant book report distributed.

Figure 1. Guided Extensive Reading (GER) Protocols

CONCLUSION

GER represents an option that ESL/EFL learners, adult learners in particular, can continue to pursue independently in the long run and eventually ease into the use of authentic materials. It is also worth noting that GER, with its emphasis on comprehensible texts covering various themes and topics to facilitate readability, interest and reading enjoyment, is also a fitting accessory to the

government's efforts to encourage reading among Malaysian students as part of its initiatives to become a fully developed nation (Inderjit, 2014).

In sum, our findings are highly encouraging in that the graded readers used were so well received. This permits us to conclude that there are well written simplified texts that can help students develop a more positive attitude towards reading in English, and subsequently improve their proficiency in the language. As aptly put forward by one of the participants: "I love the stories and I can understand the words. Make me want to read more and improve my English."

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APPENDIX A

Vocabulary Size Test (Nation & Beglar, 2007) Sample Items

First 1,000

1. SEE: They **saw** it.

a. cut
b. waited for
c. looked at
d. started

Fifth 1,000

1. DEFICIT: The company had a large **deficit**.

a. spent more money than it earned
b. went down in value
c. had a plan for spending that used a lot of money
d. had a lot of money in the bank

Tenth 1,000

1. AWE: They looked at the mountain with **awe**.

a. worry
b. interest
c. wonder
d. respect

Fourteenth 1,000

1. CANONICAL: These are **canonical** examples.

a. examples which break the usual rules
b. examples taken from a religious book
c. examples that are regular and widely accepted
d. examples discovered very recently

APPENDIX B

Instant Book Report

Your full name: _____

Group no.: _____

Book title: _____

I read all / _____ pages of the book.

(Circle 'all', **or** indicate the number of pages you read)

- How did you like the book?

Circle **one**:

1   I loved it
2   I liked it
3   I did not mind reading it
4   I wish I had not read it

- What kind of story was it?

Describe briefly: _____

(Examples: Social/Psychological issue – poverty, personality disorder, etc; Adventure; Science fiction; Mystery; Horror; Love/Romance)

- The main characters were:

_____

- Describe your favorite part of the story (if any):

_____

- If you did not like the story, describe why:

_____