

HOW MALAYSIA READS: INDIVIDUAL, HOME AND SCHOOL INITIATIVES

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"The man who doesn't read books has no advantage over the man who can't read them."

- Mark Twain

Introduction

We are living in a new world that presents us with new astounding experiences and social changes (M. Kalantzis & Ambigapathy Pandian, 2001). From paper and books, we are now confronting a range of inscription forms like spreadsheets, electronically - processed images and pictures, hypertexts, game interfaces, new storage and transmission modes like CDs, thumb drives and worldwide networking. The emergence of a new digital media era highlights the importance of promoting reading habits and behavior in a complex setting as reading helps us to advance human development that includes self-esteem and empowerment, civic participation, economic growth and cultural transformation. (M. Kalantzis & Cope, 2005). Strong reading habits enhance skills required in teaching, learning and work spaces (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a) and (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b). An increasingly competitive economy demands a high literate workforce that can pursue economic, social and civic activities that can enhance economic progress, community life and civic engagement (Ambigapathy Pandian & Shanthi Balraj, 2005).

In fact, a fresh perspective on reading is encapsulated by the Organization for Economic Development (OECD, 2003):

" Reading literacy is defined in PISA as the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society."

Viewed from this perspective, reading transcends the traditional notions ascribed to it and assumes a wider role as a potentially powerful tool that is more holistically beneficial to the learner. In other words, readers utilise texts not merely for private consumption and individual benefits but more for public sharing and the common good.

(Ruddell & Unrau, 2004) state that “every reading act is an event, or transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of science, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context” (p.1369). They view the reader and the text as two different aspects of a total dynamic situation. The meaning-making by the reader does not come from the text or the reader. It involves an active mental process during the transition between the text and the reader. The reading structure of what the reader is reading is highly influenced by the reader’s cultural, personal and social history. Apart from that reading is also influenced by the reader’s current interest, motivation and environment (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004).

Reading in Malaysia

Reading practices in many parts of the world, including Malaysia have been declining in the past few decades, and the steepest decline is among young adults (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b). Within the Malaysian context, reading is an activity that is fast losing appeal as other forms and types of media gain ascendancy (Ambigapathy Pandian, 2004b). This decline is largely attributable to the advent of the new media with its capacity to provide infotainment and interactivity through a variety of sophisticated modalities that present the visual, the aural and the sensual in easily accessible packages (Ambigapathy Pandian & Shanthy Balraj, 2010a). These novel modalities have not only displaced traditional modes of reading but have also nurtured a perception that reading is essentially tedious and monotonous activity. The net effect of this trend is the drop of reading amongst Malaysians as attested by several national level reading surveys (Small & Associates, 1997). These surveys noted that, on average, the per capita reading output amongst Malaysians amounted to 7 pages per

day with almost 80% reading only 2 books per annum. These findings imply that reading has reached a plateau amongst Malaysian public. The concern here is that many people, irrespective of their age, ethnicity, gender and education do not read and the enabling environment for the development of reading practices is rather weak. Books have been found to be important for passing examinations and once young people finish school, the reading practice dwindles rapidly (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a).

The weak reading culture is also attributed to the fact that students come from a non-reading culture both at home and at school (Ambigapathy Pandian & Shanthi Balraj, 2002b) in elucidating on the reading habits of university and upper secondary students in English observed that a majority of the respondents who read were urbanites from an English speaking background, had more access to a wide variety of reading materials within the home environment, had a supportive school environment and were invariably from a better socio-economic background. (Ismail & Zainab, 2005) in a survey of undergraduates within a local university noted the students read for academic purposes while (Ambikapathi Shanmugam, 1999) reported similar findings amongst trainee teachers. Both these findings concurred with similar research conducted elsewhere. For instance, (Wei Xia, 2003) reported a similar pattern amongst undergraduates in New Zealand. In their study, (McKnight & Dearnley, 2003) and (Guthrie, 2002) also highlighted the trends among university students to utilise electronic media for essentially the completion of tasks and assignments. These studies reveal that reading-related issues can be common in different cultural contexts.

It is important then to explore the reading practices in different settings to map some of the realities and challenges emerging in the Malaysian learning contexts. The focus on the individual, family and school setting are important aspects in thinking about reading experiences.

The individual

A new problem breeding among Malaysian students is reading reluctance (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b). Reluctant readers are able readers who have good grades in the

language but choose not to read. There is an abundance of reading materials in the libraries, but most students do not read these materials, either for purposes of information or pleasure (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b). There are various reasons why students are reluctant to read. There are instances where students refuse to read because they face reading difficulties, however, their reluctance is often rooted in a lack of interest in the given text or the act of reading itself, instead of their reading ability” (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002).

The term reluctant readers refer to people who can read but choose not to (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a) and (Smith, 1994). Reluctance to read among educated Malaysians has been related to poor reading habits and disinterest while in school as the education system in Malaysia places great emphasis on examinations as measures for academic achievement to the exclusion of other measures and values (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a). This unfortunately leads students to cultivate the mentality of reading only for the sake of undertaking examinations, instead of for interest in seeking knowledge and for pleasure.

Also, one of the things that young people often say is that it is difficult to find time to read. Their everyday lives are filled with homework, extracurricular activities, tuition, sporting activities, shopping and social media networking (Ambigapathy Pandian & Shanthi Balraj, 2010b). There are many reasons that are given but essentially it can be seen that they are not motivated towards reading as they may lack interest or do not place a high value on reading. They may also find reading boring and lack motivation. Past reading experiences, negative thoughts and attitudes, difficulty in reading and a lack of confidence may pose challenges to reading practices. The lack of focus, direction and support from immediate friends and family kills the motivation to developing a reading culture. The formation of readers’ interests and behavior is determined by a number of factors such as social values of their society, school, family and environment. Each factor has its own function and promotes the development of readers’ personalities (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b).

Home

Learning to read can be likened to mastering one's native language. When children see the family reading the newspaper or curling up with a book, they will want to follow the example. It is of benefit for young people to be immersed in a print-rich environment with suitable books and role models of adults who read both for themselves and to the young people (Woolfolk, 2004). Reading to children should not stop as they grow older. It is important for members at home to enjoy the chance to do something together. Additionally, it is crucial that young people go beyond learning to read, and develop a reading culture for lifelong learning (Ambigapathy Pandian, 2002a).

The frequency of reading events in the home is linked closely to the learner's personal focus and involvement in the literacy events (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a). Parents who create a friendly environment that nurtures reading by providing space, materials, encouragement and example will promote the love for reading (Greaney, 1986). The presence of role models at home is positively linked to two reading behavior variables: variety of materials and time spent on reading. It is likely that parents and siblings who read at home do read a variety of materials; e.g. newspapers and books in English and in Malay, and thus spend more time reading.

A Malaysian student (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a) is more likely to be a habitual reader in English if he or she

- Lives in an urban area rather than a rural area.
- Comes from a family with a higher SES
- Comes from a home where there is a greater variety and amount of materials in English, more home influence and reading models at home.
- Has attended a school with a greater variety and amount of materials in English, with more teachers who encourage students to read and more friends who read English.

- Has more exposure to English.
- Has a more positive attitude towards reading in English.

School

The decline of reading habits among students is not a new problem in Malaysia. In 1926, Lehman commented that the task of teaching reading for pleasure was not properly handled in secondary school (Rankin, 1972). A similar concern was echoed by Hirsch(1987) as cited in (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a) when he said that the school has the young people for about seven hours of a day and should therefore be able to make a significant impact on the students' literacy. Just and Carpenter (1985) as cited in (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a) quote Purves (1981) as cited in (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a) who had earlier argued that the home background was the determinant for achievement but now agree that the school also has effects on student achievement. Bowers, Howard and Charles (1987) as cited in (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997a) reported findings from a study carried out during the 1986-87 school year in Tennessee country schools where they found that the physical environment of a school significantly affected student achievement either positively or adversely. Other researchers also tend to agree that the school environment has an effect on intrinsic motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). This includes classroom organization as well as instructional and climatic variables like the quality of teacher-student and student-student relationships.

The school environment has an important role to play in fostering positive reading habits and a good library is important to help overcome the problem of catering for children who, although in a single class, have reached different levels of reading ability. Malaysian schools are now better prepared and equipped with a well-stocked library, allowing the teachers to take time with the slow readers while giving a free rein to the good readers (Ambigapathy Pandian, Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail, & Toh Chwee Hiang, 2010). Well-provided libraries with a designated, comfortable reading area certainly should encourage students to read in the library.

The availability of a variety of reading materials and sufficient materials for the students to borrow would encourage the students to read for lifelong learning pleasure. Sufficient place in the library for students to read is also important. The type of school (residential or non-residential) an individual attends at both primary and secondary levels can influence the reading habits of the students (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b). Residential schools in Malaysia are normally equipped not only with better facilities (including well-stocked libraries) but also with trained and qualified teachers; non-residential schools, on the other hand, are normally stocked with out-dated books and less trained teachers.

School variables have a direct impact on reading habits (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b). Students who come from schools where the libraries have a greater amount of reading materials as well as stronger peer influence, tend to read greater variety and to be more active in acquiring and spend more time to read (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b). Students who come from schools where there is more reading area in the library, teacher influence and peer influence tend to be more habitual readers than students who have less of these inducements to read. The availability of a reading area in the library and reading time for the students' increases exposure, and exposure was found to be the strongest determinant of reading habits (Ambigapathy Pandian, 1997b).

The discussion so far has stressed variables at the individual, home and school that impact upon reading practices and cultures in Malaysia. The model below maps some of the key variables that were found to be significant in thinking about reading habits and practices.

Explanatory Model of Reading Habits

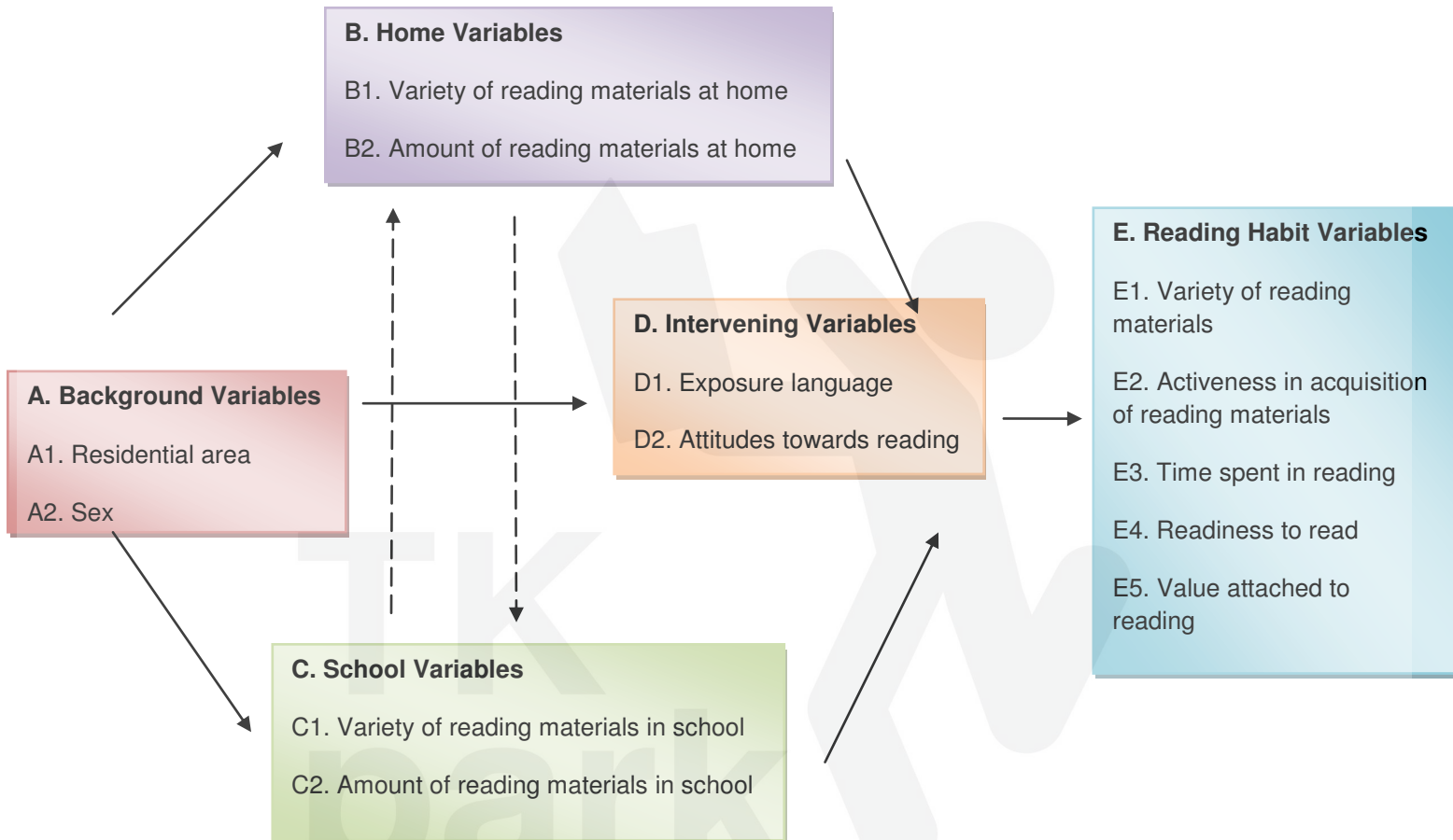


Figure 1: An explanatory model of reading habits

Malaysia aims to emerge as an active global player in world economics, politics and socio-cultural activities and sees reading and literacy as engines that will drive human endeavours and cultures. Knowledge power forms a core developmental strategy as Malaysia is currently seizing the opportunity to harness the powers of information and communication technologies to leapfrog faster into the Information Age. Recognizing that the new times and the new workplace will demand knowledgeable workers in e-business, e-technology, e-culture, e-commerce, e-learning, e-governance, Malaysia aims to promote reading cultures that enable the people to participate actively in their community, government and society at local and global levels (Ambigapathy Pandian & Kell, 2007).

Promoting reading practices

In this section, the initiatives taken by Malaysia to enhance reading practices are offered. Specific Government agencies involved in promoting reading and literacy programmes include the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Human Resources, Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture. The Community Development Division (KEMAS) of the Ministry of Rural Development has been entrusted to eradicate illiteracy among adults in Peninsular Malaysia. Even though the illiteracy rate is low, it is deemed that there is a need to formulate and implement lifelong education programmes. Amongst the initiatives undertaken by literacy agencies in addressing illiteracy are the Harmonious Family Education Programme, Religious Education Programme, Skill Training Programme, Community Resource Center and Reading Programme, Functional Literacy Program Functional Literacy Programme and Preschool Programme. Through these programmes, the learners are able to gain knowledge and skills to enable them to be a literate productive citizen. The literacy and non-formal education programmes undertaken by government agencies focuses on teaching and learning in groups and classes held in places and times convenient to the participants. Participants in a class or group may not be fewer than fifteen. The curriculum of this activity covers reading, writing and arithmetic, and aspects of family life, health, economy, civic duty

and religion. All teaching, learning and training activities are carried out in a manner suitable to the particular location. In order to ensure that literates do not relapse into illiteracy, the Ministry of Rural Development provides, on a loan basis, reading and learning materials such as books, audio tapes, posters and educational games for the rural communities.

The Ministry of Education, meanwhile, initiated reading programmes for both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia named as NILAM (Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca – The Pulse of Knowledge is through Reading) where students are required to follow the reading activities in schools. This programme aims to encourage and inculcate the love for reading among students and to encourage schools to continuously generate creative and innovative ideas to nurture reading habits. The programme also builds skills and interests in reading so that students learn to adopt reading as a habit.

There are three elements to this programme:

- (a) Reading Records: Each student records books read in a month.
- (b) Confirmation of reading: Teachers confirm records of pupils' reading.
- (c) Recognition: Recognition in the form of certificates is given to students based on the number of books read.

This programme has been successful and encouraged students to borrow books from the School Resource Centre, the library or other sources. In addition, the students were found to share books with their friends and family.

The role of the library is a critical in every community. The Malaysian National library under the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture arranges numerous reading activities to attract public participation in reading activities. The reading club organises reading/spelling competitions, forums and story-telling discussions to inspire reading interest among the Malaysian people. The Read 1Malaysia has been launched to cultivate a lifelong reading culture by promoting book exhibitions, book talks and seminars. Also, the National Library has established networks, partnerships, state

agency collaboration, publications, and individual artist programmes to promote local authors.

The School of Languages, Literacies and Translation (*SoLLaT*), housed at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) engages with student, staff and public participation in reading activities. The Integrated Quality Reading Approach (IQRA) was launched in 2009 to connect the university with communities in reading activities by offering book clubs, film series, and school-based reading programmes at schools, workplaces and other community centers (Ambigapathy Pandian et al., 2009).

Underlying theoretical framework for IQRA are socio-cultural theories of reading as postulated by Vygotsky. This develops the premise that humans are essentially social animals who map their understanding of the world via a complex process of reading, interaction, negotiation and transaction of opinions and ideas which are received, contemplated upon, understood and eventually internalised. IQRA's operational principles are also consistent with those of the socio-cultural approach as explicated extensively by (McVee, Gavelek, & Dunsmore, 2007). Firstly, the community learning paradigm as rendered in the socio-cultural perspective is in line with the idea that reading activities take place within small groups. Secondly, the IQRA framework is also based on the exchange of ideas, open debate and critical exchange of views. Viewed from this perspective, the reader in an IQRA framework invariably navigates through the Vygotskian (L. S. Vygotsky, 1978); (L. S. Vygotsky, 1987) space of public, private and social through scholarly debates. Thirdly, IQRA is inextricably linked to the ability to promote reading and knowledge acquisition within a community learning environment.

IQRA advances reading as a social process that involves reading for task performance, reading for leisure, reading for knowledge and reading for empowerment as seen in Figure 2.

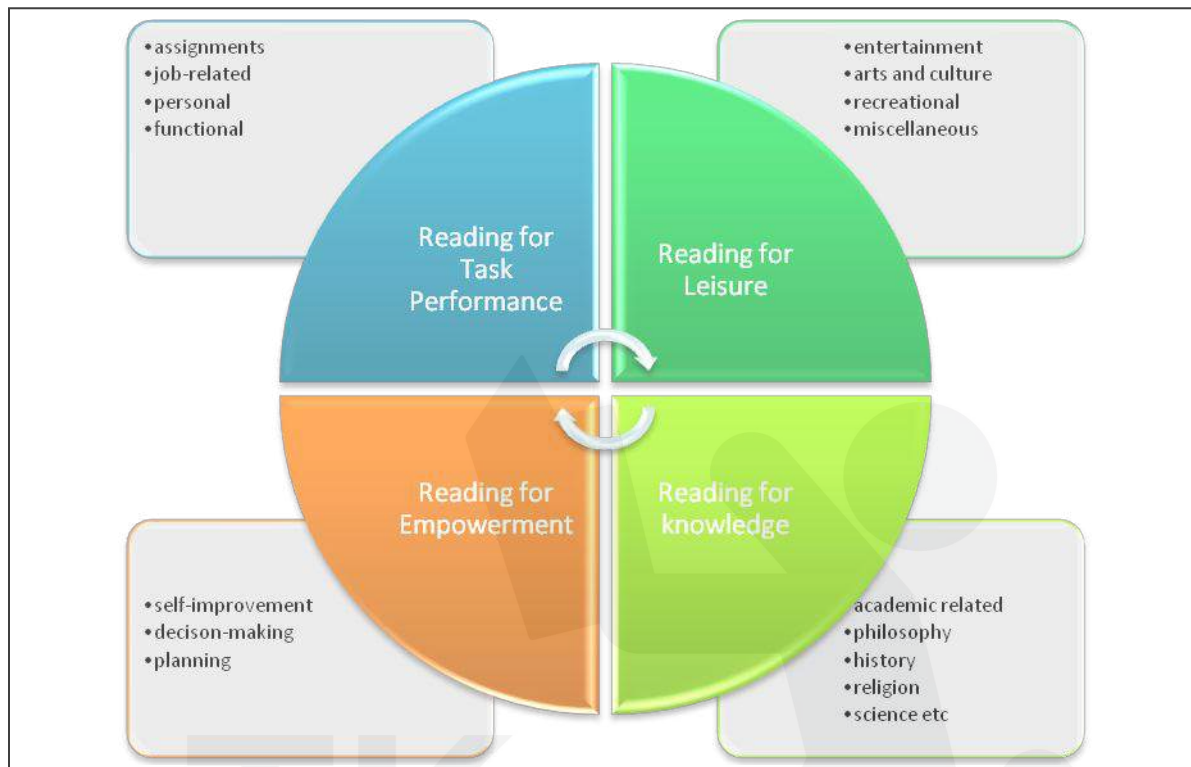


Figure 2. Reading as a social process

Essentially, the strength of IQRA resides in its inherent flexibility as it can be tailored according to the type of target reading community and their specific reading needs. Secondly, the empowering features of IQRA are set in motion as readers are provided flexibility and autonomy over their reading needs. Another feature of IQRA is its informal mode in its operation and in planning schedules. Thirdly, the social transformational aspect of IQRA is intrinsically embedded in its informal framework that encourages the exchange of ideas across class, racial and cultural divides.

Apart from the above, IQRA is essentially a social empowering tool of economic mobility as it enables previously knowledge deficient communities to acquire new information and to scaffold it onto existing knowledge. Finally, IQRA is more skewed towards

nurturing the qualitative aspect of reading (i.e., the development of critical reading, the utilisation of the cognitive and affective aspect in analysing texts and in formulating critical insights (Ambigapathy Pandian, et al., 2009).

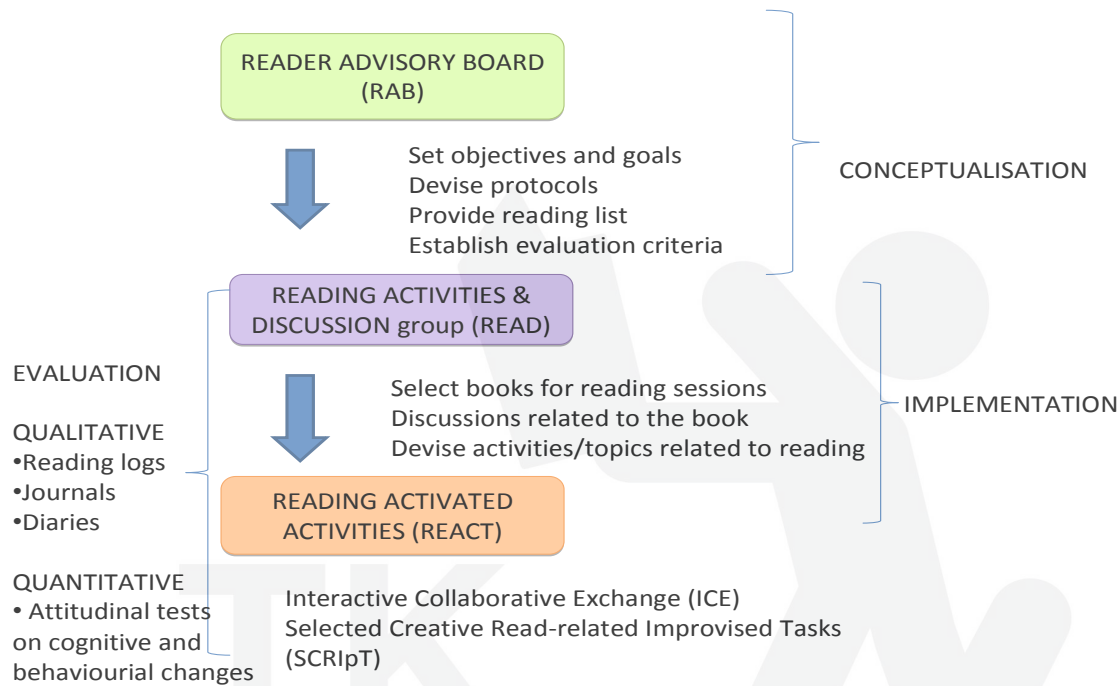


Figure 3: IQRA Implementation Framework

The first step involves the establishment of a steering committee known as the Reader Advisory Board which is basically responsible for determining the goals and objectives of the club as well as determining a subset of values for enculturation during community reading sessions. Additionally, the RAB is also tasked with formulating the reading protocols for the conduct of Book Club meetings. As the RAB contains the relevant stakeholders in the program, the views and needs of the target recipient is given due consideration. Since IQRA is also a tool for achieving institutional goals, a two-way transactional channel is established wherein both the target recipient’s needs and that of the institution can be negotiated.

The second step involves text selection by the Reading Activity and Discussion (READ) group based on the list of values issued by the RAB. This empowering procedure is designed to foster a sense of involvement and ownership amongst the Target Reading Community who will inevitably be the clientele of the programme. Further, by direct involvement in the selection process, the TRCs are indirectly liberated from ideological constraints that invariably underpin top-down implementation frameworks. In addition, the READ is also empowered in charting the modalities of the post reading activities consistent with the import of the text read. This synergistic leveraging of READ is primarily designed to exploit their insider knowledge of the text and use it as an input when charting their post reading activities.

The third step involves the reading stage which involves the meeting of the TRC within an informal and relaxed ambience in which the attendant transactional while- reading and post-reading activities are conducted within a community learning paradigm. During this stage the protocols outlined by the Reader Advisory Board (RAB) are practiced and the activities are focused on discussing various aspects of the text. In built into this component are thought provoking activities such as *Post- Reading Activated Response (PAR)*, *Interactive Collaborative Exchange (ICE)*, and *Suggested Creative Read-related Improvised Tasks (SCRIPt)* designed to elicit reader responses and gauge his inner understanding/misunderstanding of the text as well as provide him a forum to test his postulations within the public sphere as envisaged under the 4 stage recursive Vygotskian paradigm (McVee, et al., 2007) and (Forman & Cazden, 2004).

The Book Club was launched to enhance the quality of personal, workplace and social life. The book club project is based on the belief that effective reading and critical thinking skills are essential in an evolving global environment. The idea behind the *BOOK Club@SoLLaT*, USM, is rooted in a desire to inculcate reading habits and to instill strong relationships between members of the USM community, consequently creating a well-informed society. In addition, a book trading network through the *BOOK Club@SoLLaT*, USM will provide a platform for interested parties to exchange their used books for other books, or purchase other titles at a very reasonable price. The

BOOK Club@SoLLaT, USM would also act as a book bank made up of contributions by individuals, libraries, bookstores, and other organisations.

The objective of the *BOOK Club@SoLLaT*,USM is not only to assist students in developing good reading habits but also to help them acquire better reading skills. It is also envisioned that the *BOOK Club@SoLLaT* would create initiatives to sustain and nurture reading habits among USM students. Consequently, this book club initiative will create partnerships among universities, libraries, and organisations within the community. This hybrid effort will facilitate the consistent use of reading resources available in the country on a larger scale, which will in turn create a more knowledge driven society.

The university has also worked with the Penang Reading Council to enhance literacy among numerous communities in Penang. These projects include research, policy development and planning intervention strategies. Some of these strategies are Enhancing Teacher Professionalism; Workshops on curriculum development, classroom research; Module-writing and critical reading skills for teachers, education officials and community leaders; Publication of workbook and resources materials by teachers; Literacy conferences and Dissemination of literacy ideas and action plans.

With English becoming a dominant global language, the command and mastery of this language has been imperative for active participation in the global economy. Clearly there was a need to engage reading in English so that the people could participate in human interaction, reflection and knowledge production in local communities.

It is also important to sustain minority and other languages as a core part of local literary scenario so reading materials in these languages are continuously promoted. Rapid changes in the learning environment required teachers to continually rediscover and renew their skills, specifically with new media technologies. In this regard, Penang Reading Council's programmes has acted as guide to solve teachers professional

problems in the area of literacy, feel better about their practices and gain learning benefits for students.

Positive Outcomes and constraints

The participants from the various programmes of IQRA opined that they had accumulated several benefits from their involvement in the above activities. These are summarized below:

- Relaxed and informal ambience gave them an opportunity to interact with colleagues/peers in a less inhibitive manner
- Collegiality was at its peak as the participants perceived a sense of friendship and comradeship akin to that felt by members of a family unit
- Motivated to find ways on how to connect the social problems they read to their teaching and learning scenario. For instance; they sensed they were more critical of how information was transmitted and processed.
- Learnt about the need for openness in communication in order to avoid misunderstanding.
- Morale boosted through participation in activities as they felt their views were valued and there was mutual respect accorded to all.
- Increase in motivation as voicing opinions and feelings regarding certain issues had an empowering effect.
- Provided participants with a period of reflection and self-analysis of their actions in relation to the text read.
- Improvement in reading, speaking and writing skills. Participants logged their improvements in their reading log.
- It provided a platform to meet and exchange ideas. Motivated to offer viewpoints and explore insights within a communal learning environment.

- It offered a better understanding of the other participants in terms of cultures and lifestyles.
- Gained deeper insights into text deconstruction and reconstruction.
- Reading activities enabled participants to relate incidents and content to ideologies, socio-cultural factors etc.

Despite the general success of the IQRA initiative, several constraints were encountered during the implementation phase. They are discussed below:

Differences in Proficiency Levels

One of the obvious constraints encountered was the difference in proficiency levels which impeded discussion sessions and the free exchange of ideas. This problem was especially prevalent amongst participants with poor command of the English language. We overcame this problem by including Malay language texts.

Schedule Constraints

Initially, the IQRA schedule was not suitable for many teachers and family members as they were fatigued after a day's work and had to fulfill family commitments. This essentially procedural drawback threatened to curtail the programme's. Through discussions, the participants came to a consensus that they would conduct the sessions during lunch-break. Furthermore, to lend an air of friendliness to the discussion sessions, they also decided to bring along takeaways and packed food and conduct the session within a potluck ambience.

Acceptance of the IQRA approach

One of the main impediments faced involved motivating members to embrace the Integrative Quality Reading Approach in order to improve their critical literacy skills (Ambigapathy Pandian, et al., 2009). Initial resistance was encountered due to the novelty factor as well as anxiety stemming from a lack of understanding of the activities. To highlight the efficacy of IQRA as alternative learning platform we encouraged

readers to maintain a reading log that will detail their progress in language acquisition, classroom/workplace productivity as well in the development of critical literacy.

Participant Interest

One of the main challenges was the maintenance of participant interest in the programme over the long term. We addressed these concerns by constantly diversifying post reading activities through the inclusion of personal interpretative text dramatization, social engagement with external communities from different social strata, creative writing activities and other fun activities that broke the monotony of discussion based activities.

Enrolment into IQRA

A major problem we encountered was encouraging enrolment into IQRA given that the Book Club approach had to compete with attractions afforded by New Media. Our solution lay in creating a sense of special belonging through specially designed paraphernalia like t-shirts, mugs, caps and an embossed book discount cards that conferred IQRA an air of exclusivity. We augmented these attractions by constructing a relaxed and informal clubhouse ambience. Our tailoring of IQRA to the Malaysian context was furthered via a replication of the famed “sit-eat-talk’ Malaysian culture through the provision of food and drinks, potluck sessions etc. We are also in the midst of designing an online virtual book club forum to enable the exchange of views via electronic means.

Accessibility and Affordability Issues

One constraint which we fortunately did not encounter but may prove an obstacle for other interested parties is the lack of accessible to reading material especially in Third World reading environments. In fact, accessibility is very much intertwined with affordability concerns as quality reading material are often priced beyond the means of the average consumer due to currency differentials, taxation issues and income capacities. Invariably, these barriers stifle the development of reading communities like IQRA in other contexts. While these problems can be difficult in certain situations, they

can be eased through the use of alternative reading materials sourced from newspapers, magazines, travelogues etc.

School-based difficulties

At the school level, there are many challenges that are confronted in promoting reading practices. The lack of motivation and skills in the collection of reading material, poor infrastructure in many homes and schools posed major difficulties for parents, teachers and researchers. Teachers face dilemma with limited resources, little recognition and time constraints as they rush to finish syllabus with little time and motivation to develop innovative teaching and learning resources. More significantly, teachers have to influence the attitude and mind-set of students who are more interested in new media, gaming, cinema, songs and popular culture.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide an outlook on reading by first examining the changing landscape of surrounding us especially with the rise of new technologies. It has described some of reading realities faced in the Malaysian scenario and the key aspects that have driven the agenda on reading at the individual, family and school settings. The decline of reading habits and practices in the past few decades emerged as a concern. In addition the reading reluctance dimension emerged as another feature demanding attention in building a nation of participatory citizens making informed decisions. The rise of English Language in a globalised era has also indicated the need to promote reading in English so that there can be productive interactions and knowledge making communities at both the local and global levels.

The contemporary times marked a changing global communications environment amidst increasing diversities in the history and culture of learning communities and this meant a strong agenda on promoting reading practices is a critical plan that requires immediate attention. The focus on reading is essential to facilitate the participation of the Malaysian people decision-making, knowledge production, business and international relations at the personal level, school or workplace and at the public

domains. Malaysia recognised that reading and literacy forms a core component in enabling Malaysian learners to engage with differences, change and innovation in the local and world arena.

The transformation of learning settings is becoming increasingly important and the move towards a knowledge society would demand that we problematise our ideas and practices in the arena of reading practices and address life-long learning and other new demands of learning that are suited to specific needs. Evidently, the changes in the learning process have to be supported with proper policy measures at the level of national government as well as interested parties at the local levels. Providing better access to reading resources at the home front and at schools is an essential first step. It is also important to transform management of teaching institutions. More importantly, there is a need to change the role of parents, teachers and educators and the need to situate the learning process within the needs and interests of the society so that reading becomes meaningfully connected to the societal needs of the information society.

The growing significance of multimodal information and communication systems push for a more adequate response to new social practices of reading. Many literacy policies and programmes from a number of government agencies have been organised to cultivate a lifelong reading culture and to pave new ways of participating as citizens in public spaces and in new forms of establishing, identity, lifestyles and personality. The Malaysian education terrain also conceived many plans and initiatives at the primary and secondary school levels to inculcate reading cultures among young people so that learners develop the necessary knowledge, creative and thinking capacities that they would need to confront challenges in the increasingly diverse lifeworlds that they inhabit.

The transformative feature of the IQRA approach that engages individuals, the home and the school at different levels and the activities of the BOOK Club@SoLLAT should be viewed as challenges for researchers, teachers, practitioners and policy-makers in search of new ways of linking reading practices to the citizenry narratives of human experiences. This will, however, need greater linkages and networking with the

Malaysian authorities in terms of the sharing of this idea, materials, information, training and human resources.

The above discussion shows the vigorous resourcefulness and potential as well as the challenges for the involvement of reading-interest groups in creating literate environments for lifelong learning. It also shows that investing in books and reading resources is at the heart of educational and social reform, literacy enhancement and sustaining literacy skills for life, leading subsequently to a better quality of life.

Malaysia has received many plans and initiatives that would equip learners in the new millennium with reading practices and multi-literate skills they would need to confront challenges in the increasingly diverse lifeworld. While much is being discussed and planned in transforming reading habits the constraints and inadequacies of traditional schooling and the absence of reading role models in homes still pose barriers to efforts undertaken to achieve transformed learning practices that will support readers to adopt new ways of reading to enhance capacity, to participate in civic life and to nurture personal growth. Clearly, there is a need for greater linkages and networking with the Malaysian authorities in terms of sharing new ideas, materials, information, training and human resources. Only through this will it mark a beginning of a lifelong learning process that will enable learners in our communities to become not just passive spectators and consumers of knowledge, but reflective and active knowledge producing citizens of the world.

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