

Improving Writing Skills through Stages – Oriented Reading Project

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Abstract – “Improving writing skills through stages – oriented reading project” is an initiative taken in 2018 and 2019 to help low – proficiency learners to improve their reading and writing skills through a set of reading materials. The project involves 10 stages of reading tasks and in each stage students completed 10 reading tasks which were accompanied by activities that test skills that are essential to develop reading and writing skills. Students had to complete one stage in order to move to another. 25 students were involved in this project and it was carried out during the students’ free periods throughout the year. The students involved in this project were those who had failed their English language test in the PT3 examination and had an alarming score of below 30 in their term examinations in form 4. A pre – test was carried out before the project took off and they were given written and reading tests after every stage of reading to record their progress. The data collected throughout the project were the evident to show improvement and significant progresses that the students made.

Keywords – Reading, Writing, Project, Learning, Language, Reading Materials

I. INTRODUCTION

English language learners in Malaysia begins to learn the language at the tender age of 7 (Year 1) when they begin their primary education and they continue to learn till they complete their secondary education. They learn the English language in a formal education setting for eleven years. However, despite the years spent in learning the language many of them are unable to master the language even after completing their schooling years. In 2013, it was reported that less than 50% of students completing higher secondary education in Malaysia did not master the four skills in the English language (EPU 2016, pp. 10 – 2). The inability of students to master the language is attributed to various reasons such as inadequate trained and skilled teachers, limited time conversing in the target language, lack of learning resources and students’ lackadaisical attitude towards the language. Although various measures and reforms have been taking place to restore the standard of English language among school going children, it is important to look at the steps taken at the classroom level to help students to develop their English language skills. As such, this study aims to look into the effectiveness of a language learning project carried out to improve language proficiency in terms of reading and writing among 25 low – proficiency secondary school students in a school in Malaysia through a reading project.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationships between reading and writing has long been researched and numerous studies have come to positive conclusions on this matter (Abbott, Graham & Richards, 2002; Berninger et al., 2010; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). The reason for the researcher’s interest about the connections between reading and writing skills has much to do with the theories that emphasize the unique qualities of literacy. One basic idea that has emerged repeatedly in research is that reading and writing are dependent upon one another and anything that improves these abilities may have implications for both reading and writing development (Ellis, 1985; McCutchen, 2000).

Reading and writing may not be identical but they are quite similar to one another. Tierney and Shanahan (1991) had stated that students develop similar linguistic knowledge when they read and write. Shanahan (2016, p.195) has also drew a metaphor to illustrate the relationship between reading and writing – “two buckets drawing water from common well or two buildings built on a common foundation”. Therefore, focussed reading intervention programmes that are designed to enhance writing skills which can be drawn from the reading task should be able to lead to better writing performance.

Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) identified the two common relationships between reading and writing. Through this study it was found that readers draw the domain knowledge to understand what they are reading and as writers they draw the ideas from the sources they read to construct sentences and develop ideas for their written tasks.

Ahmed, Wagner & Lopez (2014), in their study on the relationship between reading and writing involving 316 students have found that the reading – to – writing models were far more superior than the writing – to – reading model. The study also concluded that the sentence and word level activities that comes together with the reading tasks further enhanced students’ knowledge to develop writing skills.

Other studies examining the relationships between reading and writing have also provided support towards the idea that reading interventions can improve students’ writing performance (Nelson, 2008; Pearson, Brenner, & Long, 2012). Shanahan (1984, 2006 & 2016) have also provided support through his studies showing that reading and writing measures can lead to 65% to 85% of success rate if reading activities are explored to develop writing skills. This was proven in his research where variance were studied at the word – levels and text – levels after a reading intervention programme to improve writing.

Grabe and Zhang (2016) compiled a list of studies on the impact of reading interventions on writing skills and they drew a general conclusion from all the studies that reading

and the related activities enhance writing performance. Similar to this study, Pearson et al., (2012) have also presented his conclusions from several studies and findings that reading intervention programmes help in improving students' language proficiency. Similar to this reviews Stotsky (1983), Nelson (2008) and Shanahan (2016) have also given similar results in their studies in which the findings have concluded that reading tasks resulted in better writing skills.

Although studies suggested that reading intervention programmes help in developing writing skills. It is important to study further and develop an intervention programme that would suite to the needs of the learners. Besides, studies on the effectiveness of reading intervention programmes to develop writing skills is an area that need to be explored further in Malaysia. Therefore, it would be beneficial to conduct a study on the effectiveness of a reading project to develop writing skills among students.

III. THE STUDY

This study investigated the effectiveness of a reading intervention project to improve writing skills among students in the higher secondary school. The purpose of reading and writing is to communicate and to communicate effectively, there are several processes that need to be adhered (Shanahan, 2016). These 'processes' were given a careful study in order to develop the reading and writing skills among low – proficiency language learners.

One of the 'processes' that the study looked into was the possible ways to help learners to develop reading and writing skills in order to be able to perform better by taking into considerations several reading and writing related issues. The issues that were raised in the process while developing the reading intervention project were the number of hours spent by students for reading and writing, current learning practices and as well as attitude towards reading and writing in the classroom.

While developing the reading project, there were also several other aspects such as the improvement that need to be focussed was given considerable attention. As learners read, they get the opportunity to improve spelling, sentences structure and acquire new vocabulary (Share 1999). Besides, reading and analysing a text would help learners to improve their own writing (MacArthur, 2016). It was also found that spending more time reading a text, would help learners to improve the ability to construct sentences and ideas with good vocabulary that is adapted or taken for the text read (Couzijn, 1999).

For this project, taking into account what was done in previous studies and the learning needs of the pupils involved in this project, a reading intervention programme was developed. The project requires learners to develop the reading and writing skills from one stage to another. The intervention programme focused on the stages oriented reading project to improve writing skills among low – proficiency English language learners in a higher secondary school setting. Therefore, the research question that the researcher wished to answer was:

- a) Can the stages – oriented reading project improve writing skills of low proficiency learners?

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a qualitative model. Students' were assessed in a pre-test on writing before the project took off and a continuous assessment was carried out throughout the project period. At the end of the project students were given a post– test to measure their improvement and achievement. The study took place in an urban secondary school in Malaysia during the first and second semester of the year from February 2018 till October 2018. In order to answer the research questions, a reading program was designed without affecting the national syllabus provided by the ministry of Education. The reading program was designed based on the current syllabus, therefore it did not affect the curriculum. The stages oriented reading project develops students' reading and writing skills from one stage to another and so on. The project requires students to complete 10 stages of reading tasks assigned to them. Each level has 10 reading tasks and each reading task required students to complete a set of questions related to vocabulary, comprehension and grammar. The 10 levels of this reading project were divided into three stages as shown in the table below:

TABLE I: STAGES IN THE READING PROGRAM

| Stages | Level Name | Level |
|--------------|-------------|----------|
| Beginner | Apprentice | Level 1 |
| | Initiated | Level 2 |
| | Trained | Level 3 |
| | Able | Level 4 |
| Intermediate | Competent | Level 5 |
| | Adept | Level 6 |
| | Experienced | Level 7 |
| Advance | Proficient | Level 8 |
| | Specialist | Level 9 |
| | Inspiring | Level 10 |

At every level, when students completed the reading task they were to complete a set of vocabulary, grammar and comprehension task that would help them to develop their language skills which would further enhance their writing skills (Moore and MacArthur, 2012). Students' progress were recorded after the completion of every reading task. Students' were reminded that they should be able to score more than 50% in all the tasks given. Those who failed to obtain 50% and above were required repeat the task till they obtain a desirable score. The following is an example of score sheet used to keep track of students' progress at every level:

TABLE II: SELF – PROGRESS CHART USED IN THE READING PROGRAM TO TRACK STUDENTS' PROGRESS

Name: _____

Class: _____

| | Card 1 | Card 2 | Card 3 | Card 4 | Card 5 | Card 6 | Card 7 | Card 8 | Card 9 | Card 10 | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | C | W | G | C | W | G | C | W | G | C | W | G | C | W | G | C | W | G | C | W | G |
| Apprentice | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Initiated | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Trained | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Able | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Competent | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Adept | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Experienced | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Proficient | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Specialist | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Inspiring | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

C = Comprehension
 W = Vocabulary Words
 G = Grammar

Participants were given progress test after every two levels to check on their progress and upon the completion of all the 10 stages, they were required to do a post – test.

Participants

A total of 25 higher secondary students participated in the study. They were all in form four. The students had been formally streamed according to the PT3 (a public examination for lower secondary students) examination results. Their English language proficiency based on the PT3 results would be grade D and below. As such, they are low – proficiency language learners. The participation of the students in this program were made compulsory with a notification letter to the parents concerning the students low – proficiency level and the project as a way to improve their proficiency levels. All the students participated in the year – long program and none of them dropped out as it was carried out during school hours during their free periods.

Instrument and Data Collection Procedure

The instrument to assess students' progress in this study was the students' self – assessment reports, progress test reports carried out after every two levels and the pre – test and post-test. Students' progress were recorded after they complemented each level and before the start a new level. These progress reports were used as measurement tools to study students' improvement.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

Pre – Test

Participants were given a reading and writing task for their pre - test. The reading task required participants to read a text and complete 15 comprehension questions. Whereas, the

writing task required them to write a story in about 150 words. All the participants completed the tasks given. Based on the observation during the pre – test, it was found that 95% of the participants did not have wide range of vocabulary for writing. It was also found in all their essays that they were unable to construct sentences correctly. All their sentences were grammatically inaccurate with distorted sentence structures. In the reading task, the students' score was an average of 30%. The result of the pre – test shows that students were lacking in reading and writing skills.

Observation

Students' progress was observed throughout the project durations and their progress were recorded from time to time. The following table is the result (average score) from the reading and writing tests given after the completion of the two levels of readings.

TABLE III: PARTICIPANTS' PROGRESS SCORES IN AVERAGE

| | Average score for reading test | Average Score for writing test |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Pre – Test | 32% | 35% |
| Test One (after the completion of level 1 and 2) | 34% | 42% |
| Test Two (after the completion of level 3 and 4) | 41% | 44% |
| Test Three (after the completion of level 5 and 6) | 53% | 48% |
| Test Four (after the completion of level 7 – 10) | 58% | 53% |

Post – test

For the post – test students were given a reading task and a writing task. They were given an hour to complete each task. For the reading tasks students were given four texts of different genres and they were required to answer comprehension, grammar and vocabulary questions. As for the writing task, students were required to write a story in about 150 words.

When the reading and writing tasks were examined, it was found that students have used the knowledge and ideas gained in the readings tasks done through the ten levels. Students have shown significant improvement in both reading and writing tasks. It was evident that the structural ideas, vocabulary and grammatical aptness have improved in their writing task. Whereas their ability to comprehend and transfer information as well as understanding contextual clues and other reading related skills were also improved tremendously. The table below shows a comparison of students results both in the reading and writing tasks done in the pre-test and post-test.

TABLE IV: A COMPARISON OF PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST

| | Average score for Reading Task | Average score for Writing Task |
|-----------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Pre-Test | 32% | 35% |
| Post-Test | 72% | 68% |

VI. DISCUSSION

During the initial reading stages, it was found that students were very lackadaisical as they felt that all the tasks that came along with the reading tasks to be burdensome. However, after they noticed the slight improvement in the first test that was conducted after the two levels of reading, their motivation escalated and was looking forward to do more reading activities whenever they had their free periods. Through the post – test it was found that the reading tasks have aided students with more vocabulary and ideas to build sentences that have made them to write more vivid vocabulary and accurate sentences in their essays. Besides, students have also shown tremendous improvement in their reading skills as they could comprehend the SPM level texts much better compared to what they did previously in the pre – test. The progress report recorded throughout the project period have shown a sharp improvement although they were stagnant at certain points due to unexplainable reasons. It is also important to note here that these group of students who were in form 4 in 2017 when the project started, completed their SPM in the year 2019 with excellent results in the 1119 English language paper. These were the students who had an average of Ds in their PT3 scores. Their SPM results is shown below :

TABLE V: SPM RESULTS OF STUDENTS WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THE READING PROJECT

| Number of Students | Grades |
|--------------------|--------|
| 3 | A+ |
| 5 | A |
| 7 | A- |
| 7 | B+ |
| 3 | B- |

VII. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The results of this study have important implications for educators in Malaysia. The stages oriented reading and writing project can be attempted to help low – proficiency learners who are yet to find ways to improve themselves. Proper planning and implementation of the project will be able to help the learners to improve their reading and writing skills. Thus will be able to improve students' ability to read and write better in Malaysia.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of the stages oriented reading project to improve the reading and writing fluencies among the students in the higher secondary classroom. The finding from both the observation and data collection suggest that the participants of this project have shown good improvement in both the reading and writing skills. The success of the study shows that reading culture should be emphasised among students in Malaysia to improve their reading and writing fluencies.

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