The Reading Comprehension Level of the Malay Language of Primary School Pupils

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ABSTRACT
Reading comprehension skill is one of the main skills which need to be acquired by primary school pupils in Malaysia. This research is aimed at developing an instrument to measure the reading comprehension level in the Malay Language (ML) for primary school pupils. With this instrument, the comprehension level of the ML for primary school pupils can be identified. Moreover, this research is also aimed at developing a matrix table of the ML reading comprehension level amongst these pupils. The reading comprehension model for this study is derived from the model suggested by Dagostino & Carifio (1994). This model is based on the principle that the evaluation process is integrated into reading comprehension. The comprehension process moves from one continuum of the literal comprehension to the inferential comprehension parallel to the information in the texts which are explicit or *implicit. The result shows that the reading comprehension level of ML for Phase I pupils was low while the level of ML for Phase II pupils was moderate. This finding ascertains the reading comprehension level of ML for primary school pupils in Malaysia and can be used as a guide for teachers to stress upon the teaching of the skills which were less acquired by primary school pupils.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading skill is one of the main skills which need to be acquired by primary school pupils. In the early stage of the primary school, which is Phase 1 (Year 1 to 3), the teaching of reading skill stresses the ability to decode, whereas at Phase II of the primary school, most of the Years 4 to 6 pupils are expected to achieve the necessary level of reading fluency based on the prescribed syllabus. In a survey of Year 5 pupils, the research findings indicated that the pupils involved in the research were able to read fluently but could not comprehend what was being read (Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2000a). In a case study which observed the teaching of the Malay Language (ML) subject in a primary school, the findings indicated that teachers did not stress on the acquisition of basic comprehension skill (Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2000b and 2001).

The findings from both research demonstrated that the skill to decode was stressed but the comprehension skill was given less attention at the primary school. If pupils were able to decode successfully, then they were assumed to be able to use their reading skill and the knowledge of the language to read and comprehend texts. In addition, there were not many teaching and evaluation resources prepared for pupils to apply their reading skill, which was to comprehend what was being read.

The problem of pupils not being able to comprehend what is being read and the fact that there is no specific approach which stresses the acquisition of comprehension skill ought to be given serious attention. Without having understood what is being read, the potential for students to acquire knowledge might be jeopardized. As comprehension is a complex intellectual process (Dechant, 1981 and; Rubin, 1991) which involves several categories and comprehension skills, an instrument to measure the reading comprehension level in the Malay Language needs to be developed. The development of such instrument needs to include the specific criteria so that the pupils' level of comprehension could be identified. With the identification of the level of comprehension amongst

primary school pupils, further actions and efforts could be implemented in order to ensure that pupils acquire the comprehension skills successfully.

Based on the problem discussed above, this paper aims to discuss the development of an instrument in order to measure the reading comprehension level in the Malay Language for the primary school pupils in Malaysia. Thus, the comprehension level (literal, inferential, critical-creative) of the Malay Language for the primary school pupils could be identified. Apart from that, this research was also aimed at developing a matrix table of reading comprehension level of the Malay Language amongst primary school pupils in Malaysia.

2. COMPREHENSION MODEL

The reading comprehension model derived from the model suggested by Dagostino and Carifio (1994) was chosen. This model was arranged based on the principle that the evaluation process was integrated into the reading comprehension. The evaluation occurred frequently and on-going, along with the interaction between the reader and the text. In this model, the components of the reading comprehension involved the message evaluation, message interpretation and message extraction which moved freely and interactively.

The evaluation of a certain text is a part of the reader's response towards the matters that are comprehended and this represents a part of the message interpretation. The interpretation could influence the evaluation and this is a dynamic process.

The interpretation of a certain text is the mediatory response in the evaluation process about the matters that are comprehended by the reader. The interpretation of texts has two directions:

i) *Closed convergent thinking* is a text processing style which limits the direction in which a reader makes a conclusion. The text is explicit and the interpretation becomes closed and literal. The term 'closed' here means certain expectations and specific criteria influence the thinking according to certain ways.

ii) *Open divergent thinking* is a text processing style which diversifies the directions in which a reader makes a conclusion or develops an explanation and interpretation of a certain text. The text is implicit and open which lends itself to various interpretations or predictions. The terms 'open' and 'divergent' focuses on other possible comprehensions or interpretations which are creative in nature (information organization).

The *texts* refer to the writer's information through the texts which have the level of explicitness to the implicitness. The level of explicitness or implicitness of a text influences the reader's comprehension and interpretation of information from the texts. Every reader is different from another reader from the context of his or her experience in general or specific, style and development as well as the integrated knowledge of topic and ability to comprehend the texts.

The comprehension process moves from one continuum of the literal comprehension to the inferential comprehension parallel to the information in the texts which are explicit or implicit. The evaluation of critical comprehension, however, occurs in an on-going and integrated with the interpretation. The characteristics of maturity, character, attitude, knowledge and experience, and the intellectual ability of an individual influence his or her ability to read critically.

Dagostino and Carifio (1994) stressed that most views on the teaching-learning are categorized according to the behaviourist, cognitive or the integration of these two opposing theories. They explicated that the behaviourists believed that learning occurred when the teaching was organized according to its stages. On the contrary, the cognitivists viewed knowledge as a web of concept which had been organised in the minds, and the learning was the attaining of the structured knowledge. Therefore, the fact that the reading comprehension was a synthesis of the two elements from the points of view from both the behaviourists and cognitivists became the focus in the development of instrument in order to measure the reading comprehension which consisted of three categories; *literal, inferential and critical-creative*. Each category had several skills. All these skills were measured

through the series of questions that were developed and arranged according to the skills, from easy to difficult.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was a quantitative study (Gay and Ariasian, 2003) employing a survey technique. The reading comprehension research of the Malay Language (ML) primary school pupils was implemented in three stages. *Stage One* involved the development of the instrument, which was the Reading Comprehension Test of ML for Phase I and II. *Stage Two* was the implementation of the research in order to identify the reading comprehension level of ML for the Phase I and II primary school pupils. *Stage Three* was the development of the matrix table of reading comprehension level for the Phase1 and II primary school pupils.

The population of the study comprised of primary school pupils in the Peninsula Malaysia, the Phase I pupils (Years 2 and 3) and Phase II (Years 4, 5 and 6). In order to obtain the research samples who would truly represent the population, cluster sampling technique was used. Cluster sampling technique was the sample selection based on a group and not random individuals (Gay and Ariasian, 2003). All members in the selected group had the same characteristics. In this study, the primary school pupils had the same characteristics from the aspects of the curriculum practice and system. In addition, the primary school teachers had the same training and academic qualifications.

Furthermore, Gay & Airasian (2003) explained that the cluster sampling was easier when the population was big and scattered widely geographically, and the researcher could not obtain the name list and the number of all the population for random sampling. The cluster sampling technique could also be employed in stages, which involved the selection of the sub-group from the original group (Gay & Airasian, 2003). In this research, the population was focused on the national primary school pupils who were selected based on the zone (North, East, Middle, South), state (Kedah, Terengganu, Selangor and Johor), location (urban and rural), school (National Primary School), level (I and II) and year of schooling (Years 2, 3, 4, 5, 6).

The selection of Phase I and II pupils was according to their intact groups as the class or pupils from a certain school were difficult to segregate to the research group and the non-research group. The segregation of the class or pupils who were not able to read from the research group caused administration problems and involved permission from the school. Therefore, all Phase I (Years 2 and 3) and Phase 1 II (Years 4, 5 and 6) primary school pupils from selected schools were chosen as the samples for this study. As a result, the number of classes and pupils from each selected school and location was not balanced. In addition, the enrolment of the rural schools was smaller compared to the enrolment of the town schools. Therefore, the number of rural schools (9 schools) was more than the number of urban schools (7 schools). Overall, 2763 Phase I and 4101 Phase II pupils were involved in this research.

Two instruments were developed; the Reading Comprehension Test of ML for Phase I Pupils and the Reading Comprehension Test of ML for Phase II Pupils. The development of the contents of the instrument focused on the following four aspects: a) the selection of taxonomy/category and the comprehension skill, b) the selection and the design of the reading texts, c) the development of items/questions or 'stem', and d) the design of the selection of answers.

a) The *taxonomy or comprehension categories* modified from Barrett's Taxonomy (1976) that were selected for this research were the literal, inferential and critical-creative. The *literal comprehension* refers to the memorization of facts in the reading texts. Pupils were required to identify and memorize the subject which was discussed by the writer explicitly in the text and in the excerpt. In other words, the literal comprehension involved pupils' ability to obtain the overt information from the texts. The literal comprehension needed the low level of thinking which would be the basic for the higher level thinking (Rubin, 1991). The focused skills involved were as the following:

- Identifying the meaning of a word (L1A), a phrase (L1B) or a sentence (L1C.
- Identifying the main idea (L2).

- Identifying the important point (L3)
- Making comparison (L4).
- Identifying the cause-effect (L5).
- Identifying the sequence of ideas/events (L6).

The *inferential comprehension* refers to the ability of pupils interpreting meaning. Pupils are able to summarize, interpret, and make a generalization, a conclusion and a prediction. The inferential comprehension needs to use the overt information together with the intuition and experience. Apart from that, the inferential comprehension needs the high level thinking as the questions involve answers which are not explicitly stated in the text. The inferential comprehension skills include the following:

- Interpreting the main idea (F1)
- Interpreting the important point (F2)
- Interpreting comparison (F3).
- Interpreting cause-effect (F4).
- Making a conclusion (F5)

The *critical-creative comprehension* integrates the pupils' ability to do overall evaluation towards a certain information or idea which is read, make a conclusion about the precision or suitability of the given information or idea, apply the information, and emphasize the production of a new idea. The critical-creative comprehension needs a divergent thinking, which is the thinking skill outside the literal and inferential comprehension (Rubin, 1991), which depends on the knowledge and personal experience of the pupils. The skills that were in focus include the following:

- Evaluating (K1)
- Making a conclusion (K2)
- Internalizing (K3)
- Identifying the moral of the story/lesson (K4)

b) In the *selection and development of the texts*, each text was aimed at measuring one comprehension category (literal, inferential or critical-creative category) which comprised of several skills. However, the texts which tested more than one comprehension category were also developed so that there were varieties in the ways of testing. The *types of texts* selected included expository texts, fictions, reports, letters, poems, biographies, speeches, dialogues and news reports. Overall, there were 12 texts selected for the Phase I and 12 more texts selected for Phase II. The contents of the texts consisted of various fields or subjects such as science, literature, language, history and fiction. As some of the fields of knowledge were inter-dependent, the reading texts were classified into more than one subject. The texts that contributed to the existing knowledge and cultural-bias that were expected to give priority or privilege to certain pupils were avoided. The texts used consisted of short and long texts, with less than 100 words for Phase I and more than 100 words for Phase II.

c) The instrument items and questions developed consisted of various forms which include sentences from the text that needed the completion with choice of answers, items that needed the choice of answers (multiple-choice), and instructions and blanks to be filled in with multiple choices. The Item Specification Table for the Reading Comprehension of ML for Phase I and II were also developed. In this study, fifty items of the multiple-choice were developed to represent the skills in the literal, inferential and critical-creative comprehension categories.

In the development of the items, several things needed close attention. *First,* the arrangement of the item developed was based on the comprehension skill and not necessarily indicated the level of difficulties. In the multiple-choice items, the factors which influenced the level of difficulties were given close attention, for example the forms of the item, style of the reading texts, and the pupils' existing knowledge on certain subject and the background of the subject.

Second, the implicit information and the inferential definition The implicit information was based on two sources; the explicit information which was present in the texts and the pupils' existing knowledge. The inferential concept for Barrett (1976) referred to the integrated synthesis of the selected literal content with the existing knowledge, intuition, and readers' imagination. On the other

hand, Pearson and Jackson (1978) differentiated between the items that needed information form the texts but were not too apparent (*textually implicit*) with the questions that needed readers to use the script in order to get to the answers (*scriptually implicit*).

The objective for developing the items was to measure pupils' comprehension towards printed texts. Therefore, the development of items needed meticulousness so that the answers for the:

a. *literal* items could be found explicitly in the texts.
b. *inferential* items did not depend on the texts or the information could not necessarily be found in the texts but the information from the texts could guide pupils to interpret their answers.
c. *critical-creative* items did not depend on the texts and the information was not found in the texts but they needed pupils to think beyond the texts by giving opinions and making predictions.

d) The point that needed to take into account in *developing the choice of answers* for the items was the suitability of the choice of answers with the cognitive task that was related to the content and the texts. The syntax and semantic forms of the items too needed to be different from the texts so that pupils understood the contexts and not only recognized the form in order to answer the items correctly. Besides, the multiple-choice items were the only most objective and able to measure the reading comprehension skill among primary school pupils in a large number. There were four options for the answers; A, B, C, and D for each item. In the process of developing the answers for each item, the functions for each option were considered and assigned whether it is a correct answer, a distractor or a wrong answer.

4. RESULTS

1. The reading comprehension level of ML for the Phase I pupils was *low*, with the mean score of 37.31 (refer Table 1 in Appendix 1). 55.6% of the overall research samples (n = 2763) scored less than 36%. The literal (39.46) and critical-creative comprehension categories (39.04) were at the average level, whereas the inferential comprehension category (34.10) was at the low level.
2. The reading comprehension level of ML for the Phase II pupils, however, was *average*, with the mean score of 42.1 (see Table 3 in Appendix 2). 53.7% of the overall research samples (n = 4101) scored more than 41%. The literal comprehension category level was 47.55, which was at the average level, whereas the inferential and critical-creative comprehension categories were at the low level.
3. The reading comprehension skill of ML which was acquired by the Phase I primary school pupils was the skill of identifying the main idea (L2). On the other hand, the skill that was least acquired was the skill of recognizing the meaning of word/ phrase/ sentence (L1). Other skills in the literal, inferential and critical-creative categories which were acquired by the Phase I pupils were at the average and low levels (refer Table 2 in Appendix 1).
4. The reading comprehension skills of ML which were acquired by the Phase II primary school pupils were the skills of identifying the cause-effect (L5) and important points (L3) and identifying the moral of the story/ lesson (K4). All these three skills were at the high level of acquisition. However, the skills of making a comparison (L4) and making a conclusion (K2) were at the very low level for the Phase II pupils. Other skills in the literal, inferential and critical-creative comprehension categories were acquired at the average and low levels (see Table 4 in Appendix 2).
5. Based on the Matrix Table, the pattern for the reading comprehension level of ML for Phase I pupils were at the low level (refer Table 2 in Appendix 1). Year 3 pupils acquired the comprehension skill at the average level, whereas the Year 2 pupils at the low level.
6. The pattern for the reading comprehension level of ML for Phase II pupils was at the average level (see Table 4 in Appendix 2). There was an increase in the score for each skill for Years 4, 5 and 6. This indicated that the reading comprehension level for Year 6 pupils was higher than Years 4 and 5, and vice versa.

This research finding could ascertain the reading comprehension level of ML for primary school pupils in Malaysia and could be used as a guide for teachers to stress upon the teaching of the skills which were less acquired by the Phase I and II primary school pupils.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: The Reading Comprehension Level of ML for Phase I Pupils

Comprehension Level	Range Score (0 – 84 %)	No. of Pupils (n=2763)	Percentage (100 %)
Very Low (VL)	< 25	501	18.1
Low (L)	26 – 36	1035	37.5
Average (A)	37 – 46	615	22.3
High (H)	47 – 56	319	11.5
Very High (VH)	> 57	293	10.6

Table 2: The Matrix Table for Reading Comprehension Level of ML For Phase I Pupils in Primary School

Comprehension Category & Skills	Overall Mean Score	Mean Score Year 2	Mean Score Year 3
Literal (L)	*39.46 (A)*	*34.00 (L)*	*44.72 (A)*
Main idea (L2)	57.18 (VH)	51.49 (H)	62.67 (VH)
Comparison (L4)	44.48 (A)	36.65 (A)	52.03 (H)
Cause and effect (L5)	37.20 (A)	31.51 (L)	42.68 (A)
Important point (L3)	33.77 (L)	27.40 (L)	39.91 (A)
Sequence of ideas/events (L6)	31.29 (L)	27.09 (L)	35.35 (L)
Meaning of word/phrase/sentences (L1)	29.22 (L)	25.52 (L)	32.78 (L)
Inferential (I)	*34.10 (L)*	*29.06 (L)*	*38.97 (A)*
Conclusion (F5)	42.86 (A)	36.65 (A)	48.85 (H)
Cause and effect (F4)	38.13 (A)	31.27 (L)	44.74 (A)
Comparison (F3)	30.52 (L)	25.35 SR)	35.49 (L)
Important point (F2)	29.87 (L)	26.50 (L)	33.12 (L)
Main Idea (F1)	28.97 (L)	25.79 (L)	32.04 (L)
Critical-Creative (K)	*39.04 (A)*	*33.55 (L)*	*44.33 (A)*
Evaluating (K1)	37.62 (A)	33.90 (L)	41.20 (A)
Internalizing (K3)	36.57 (A)	30.90 (L)	42.04 (A)
Moral of the story (K4)	32.54 (L)	28.61 (L)	36.32 (L)
Conclusion (K2)	31.45 (L)	26.20 (L)	36.51 (A)

Comprehension Level: VL = < 25, L = 26- 36, A = 37 - 46, H = 47 - 56, VH = > 57

Table 3: Reading Comprehension Level of ML for Phase II Pupils

Comprehension Level	Range Score (0 – 76 %)	No. of Pupils (n=4101)	Percentage (100 %)
Very Low (VL)	< 30	925	22.6
Low (L)	31 – 40	974	23.8
Average (A)	41 – 50	1093	26.7
High (H)	51 – 60	820	20.0
Very High (VH)	> 61	289	7.0

Table 4: The Matrix Table for Reading Comprehension Level of ML For Phase II Pupils in Primary School

Comprehension Category and Skills	Overall Mean Score	Mean Score Year 4	Mean Score Year 5	Mean Score Year 6
Literal (L)	*47.55 (A)*	*39.59 (A)*	*47.63 (A)*	*55.32 (H)*
Cause and effect (L5)	55.57 (H)	44.35 (A)	56.29 (H)	65.91 (VH)
Important Point (L3)	54.72 (H)	43.24 (A)	54.23 (H)	66.52 (VH)
Main idea (L2)	50.69 (A)	43.29 (A)	52.44 (H)	56.25 (H)
Sequence of ideas/ events (L6)	49.16 (A)	40.03 (L)	50.13 (A)	57.17 (H)
Meaning of word/phrase/sentences (L1)	38.89 (L)	37.32 (L)	38.35 (L)	40.97 (L)
Comparison (L4)	27.92 (VL)	24.81(VL)	26.86 (VL)	32.05 (L)
Inferential (I)	*38.35 (L)*	*33.37 (L)*	*38.28 (L)*	*43.32 (A)*
Cause and effect (F4)	46.47 (A)	42.89 (A)	46.42 (A)	50.04 (A)
Comparison F3)	42.65 (A)	34.09 (L)	43.29 (A)	50.04 (A)
Conclusion (F5)	34.63 (L)	29.36 (L)	34.58 (L)	39.88 (L)
Main Idea (F1)	31.09 (L)	27.14 (VL)	31.71(L)	34.38 (L)
Important Point (F2)	30.95 (L)	31.28 (L)	31.02 (L)	30.35 (VL)
Critical-Creative (K)	*38.84 (L)*	*35.51 (L)*	*38.86 (L)*	*42.12 (A)*
Moral of the story (K4)	51.76 (H)	46.86 (A)	53.05 (A)	55.28 (A)
Evaluating (K1)	41.66 (A)	37.20 (L)	42.30 (A)	45.42 (A)
Internalizing (K3)	38.43 (L)	33.52 (L)	37.89 (L)	43.81(A)
Conclusion (K2)	27.69 (VL)	27.57 (VL)	26.59 (VL)	28.91(VL)

Comprehension Level: VL = < 30, L = 31 – 40, A = 41 – 50, H = 51 – 60, VH = > 61