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**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF UNIVERSITY READING:
THE STRUGGLING EFL READER'S PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore the cognitive representations of the six struggling EFL readers studying at a private university in Malaysia to obtain a rich description of their lived experience. To this end, a qualitative research design was selected to answer a central research question and four sub-questions. Using the transcendental phenomenological approach, the research instruments included the researcher as the primary human instrument, the research participants who were the co-researchers, a research assistant, a reading strategies questionnaire, a motivation for reading questionnaire, as well as participants' drawings. A group of six EFL students, who struggled with reading academic texts in their respective content areas of study at a private university, were selected by purposeful sampling. Data analysis showed that the struggling readers had reading difficulties and struggled to cope with unfamiliar and difficult content area texts, saw the benefits of group reading discussion with peers and lecturers, exhibited certain behaviours towards university expectations, but were able to rationalise their difficulties with university reading. The findings revealed that they needed and expected university support in reading so that they could persist in their university study and earn their degrees. A key implication of this study suggests a need – support in reading skills suitable for university reading to help the struggling readers.





KAJIAN FENOMENOLOGIKAL MENGENAI PEMBACAAN DI UNIVERSITI: PERSPEKTIF PELAJAR EFL YANG BERMASALAH MEMBACA

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk meneroka representasi kognitif enam pembaca EFL yang bermasalah membaca semasa melanjutkan pengajian ke universiti swasta di Malaysia dan juga menghuraikan pengalaman enam pelajar tersebut. Rekabentuk penyelidikan kualitatif telah dipilih untuk menjawab persoalan utama penyelidikan dan persoalan sampingan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologikal transenden, instrumen kajian terdiri daripada penyelidik sebagai instrumen utama, peserta kajian yang menjadi penyelidik bersama, pembantu penyelidik, borang soal selidik strategi membaca, borang soal selidik motivasi untuk membaca, serta lukisan peserta. Sekumpulan enam EFL pelajar, yang bermasalah dengan membaca teks-teks akademik dalam bidang kandungan pengajian mereka masing-masing di universiti swasta, telah dipilih secara persampelan bertujuan. Analisis data menunjukkan bahawa enam pelajar tersebut mempunyai kesukaran membaca dan bermasalah dalam menangani kandungan teks peringkat universiti, dapat manfaat daripada perbincangan bacaan dalam kumpulan dengan rakan-rakan dan pensyarah, mempamerkan tingkah laku tertentu ke arah kehendak universiti, dan mampu merasionalkan kesukaran sendiri dengan pembacaan universiti. Dapatan kajian mendedahkan bahawa mereka memerlukan dan mengharapkan sokongan pembacaan untuk memahami teks. Implikasi kajian menunjukkan pelajar perlu bimbingan kemahiran bahasa Inggeris terutama kemahiran membaca yang sesuai dengan peringkat pengajian universiti bagi memahami teks.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

Numerous past research have been conducted on the problems of struggling readers.



They have contributed much to the body of knowledge on reading in the English language. Yet there continues to be students who still require support to cope with their reading deficits. The problem of struggling readers exists at all levels; it applies also to university students who struggle to comprehend what they read in their respective content areas.

It has been estimated that 30 percent of those who enrol for university studies in Malaysia are underprepared (Isarji Sarudin et al., 2008; Rosemala Ismail, 2008; Razianna Abdul Rahman, 2005). Unprepared students are those “whose previous educational experiences have not, for a variety of reasons, sufficiently prepared them for the college level reading, critical thinking, and writing required of them...” (Huse et al., 2005 p. 30). Thus, the problem of students who struggle to read in the EL remains largely unresolved, despite the availability of intervention programs.





This is of concern because reading comprehension in the EL is *sine qua non*, especially at a university where it is used as the medium of instruction. Therefore, this report posits that, with heightened awareness of the issue, university authorities could deliberate on how their teaching staff could incorporate language development into content area knowledge transfers so that students who struggle with academic literacy could benefit from their instruction.

1.1 Relevance of Reading in English

1.1.1 The 21st Century Workplace

According to the paper *Redesigning Education: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century* by Hallissy, Deirdre, Hurley, and Marshall (2013), if the world economy is to remain robust in the 21st century and beyond, it has to consider seriously the trend away from traditional agricultural and manufacturing and move towards a knowledge-based economy, particularly in science and technology.

For this to happen, several skills have been identified by leading bodies, such as the International Society for Technology in Education (2007), the Metiri Group (2003), the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, or P21, (2007), as well as a Times magazine article (Wallis, 2006). The skills include knowing more of the world, thinking outside the box, becoming smarter about new sources of information, developing good people skills, solving complex, multidisciplinary, open-ended problems through critical thinking, and life/job skills, which Mishra and Kereluik (2011) define as ‘skills that serve to create lifelong learners.’





For many students, the primary purpose of completing their university programme is to gain employment at the 21st century workplace – either within Malaysia or in companies that operate globally. For this reason, an important question is whether the universities are providing the students with skills base that the workplace seek? To answer this key question, it could be pertinent to briefly examine the expectations of the various parties involved in the present era of the 21st century and beyond.

The march towards global integration arises from the interchange of worldviews, products and services, ideas and other aspects of culture. Change is also ubiquitous. For these reasons, the 21st century university graduate needs to be literate in the major common languages, of which the English language is one. If the aim is to work for companies that function globally, then English literacy is needed at the workplace of the 21st century. Of course, if the aim is to find employment within one's national borders, then proficiency in one's national language should be sufficient. This research is skewed towards the former condition – the workplace where English is the operating language.

Given the just-mentioned understanding, there exists a dichotomy. On one hand, the 21st century workplace expects universities to prepare human resources that are knowledge-based, technologically-savvy, and EL-literate (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, or P21, 2006). On the other hand, the universities may view their primary role as providers of content area knowledge, and not specifically as EL literacy providers.



The literacy demands at the workplace are statistically evident. According to Biancarosa and Snow, “the 25 fastest growing professions have far greater than average literacy demands, while the 25 fastest declining professions have lower than average literacy demands” (Biancarosa and Snow, 2006, p. 8). People today live in a fast-paced, constantly changing, and highly technological world that demands reading and writing skills. The workplace in the 21st century world and beyond requires that its employees are able and willing to read critically to solve complex, multidimensional problems.

Back in the 1970s, Alvin Toffler expressed this concern in another way in his book *Future Shock*: “the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn” (Toffler, 1970).

Clearly, to thrive at the workplace today, the worker has to be able to learn and then, as the environment changes, to unlearn and relearn, as necessary. This calls for a higher level of mastery of the English language. To do so, good reading skills and reading strategies would be indispensable for the worker to keep up with the ever-changing and ever-evolving technologies.

Similarly, since much of the readily accessible information accessible in the Digital Age are usually written in the English, it follows that these workers must be able to locate this information, and then to read, interpret, evaluate, and use these resources in this target language. Far beyond mere reading for literal meanings, university-educated employees are expected to have well-developed aptitudes for discerning patterns, making inferences and generalizations, and then to read creatively and critically to apply existing information to new and unfamiliar situations (Metiri



Group, 2011; P21, 2006). Therefore, to reinforce the point, reading competence in the English is highly desirable.

1.1.2 The 21st Century University

Given that scenario, one of the major concerns in Malaysia is that many graduates lack adequate English literacy. For instance, a leading local daily reports: “Medical deans council of public universities chairman Professor Dr Raymond Azman Ali expressed concern over the poor command of English among medical undergraduates and new doctors” (The Star, 11 November 2015). However, the concern over the poor command of the English among our university graduates is not confined to medical practice alone.



experienced difficulty in securing employment (HRM Asia, 2012). Surveys indicate a worrying trend of increasing unemployment among graduates (Chiew, 2013). According to a top recruitment firm in Malaysia, the fact is that almost a quarter of graduates were unemployed in 2010 (Kelly Services, 2012). This is despite the fact that there were increases in job opportunities for university-educated human resources.

According to the same source, this could indicate that there exists mismatched skill sets between university graduates and the job market in Malaysia. In other words, the mismatch is indicative of the fact that the competences of graduates produced by 21st century Malaysian higher learning institutions have not met the requirements of the 21st century workplace. Furthermore, Kelly Services did not





discount the possibility that the ineffective delivery system in higher institutions could play a part. This is a serious allegation.

Statistics show that, while the overall global unemployment is expected to continue to keep rising, the demand for workers with the skills that employers want in order to fill vacancies in a knowledge-based, technology-driven economy remain (Manpower, 2010). To this, Kirsch and Guthrie (1984) find that reading contributes significantly to job success, career development, and the ability to respond to change. The question, therefore, is whether university graduates are being equipped with skills of thinking deeply about issues, solving problems creatively, working in teams, communicating clearly in various 21st century media, learning ever-changing technologies, and dealing with a continual flood of information. If human resources are not thus equipped, then it is only prudent that tertiary education providers address the void areas to enhance graduate employability.

1.1.3 The 21st Century University Student

Straddled between the contrasting view points of the workplace and the university is the student – the emerging adult (Arnett, 2013). Today's university student has passed the stage of adolescence and entered emerging adulthood, which is the stage before taking his place in society as a full adult with career and family of his own. The emerging adult could be between 18-25 years, and even 30 years (Arnett, 2013). He is therefore generally more mature than his predecessors.





As mentioned earlier, the 21st century employer seeks human resources with knowledge and information skills, beyond mere university degrees. To his credit, today's emerging adult realises that higher education is an imperative to obtain the better jobs available in the information-based economy (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006). For this reason, the emerging adult today has chosen to postpone taking on full adulthood responsibilities by first obtaining postsecondary education.

While the realisation that a university qualification is desirable, he tends to overestimate his reading (and writing) competence. He is inclined to underestimate the university requirement for English proficiency. "Many of today's students are poor readers, overwhelmed by the density of their college textbooks and baffled by the strangeness and complexity of primary sources and by their unfamiliarity with academic discourse" (Bean, 1996, p. 133).

This view agrees with the universal perception that many students are not prepared to read at the levels required for postsecondary success (Leamnsion, 1999; Nist and Kirby, 1989). According to Leamnsion (1999, p. 9), "Most first-year students do not know how to listen well, to make notes on what they hear, to read with comprehension, or to write referentially about the real world. Nonetheless, an equally important premise is that they are completely capable of learning to do all of these things." If true, it is a serious indictment of the educational institutions concerned.





1.1.4 Trend in University Enrolment

The phenomenon of the emerging adult could be a major reason that local and international student enrolment in Malaysian universities has been increasing (Chong and Amlı, 2013). In 2015, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) stated that there were more than 120,000 international students enrolled in Malaysia, up from 27,872 in 2002 and 80,750 in 2009. The number is expected to reach an international enrolment of 200,000 by 2020, and continues to grow with increasing intake from Southeast Asia, as well as from China, India, and the Gulf Region (Asian Correspondent, 2016).

In fact, this trend is not just a Malaysian phenomenon; it is a global phenomenon (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). Chong and Amlı noted that “the number of foreign students enrolled in public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia increased from 27,872 in 2002 to 86,919 in 2010. This increase represents a significant growth in student enrolment in the tertiary institutions sector (Chong and Amlı, 2013).

1.1.5 Corresponding Increase of Struggling Readers

The inference from the upward trend in university enrolment is that there could also be more students who would struggle at reading at tertiary level. For the latter, one could safely assume that they sign up for higher education studies because they think they could get by with their literacy competence and somehow succeed in getting the qualification that they seek.





However, statistics reveal that about a third of students who join tertiary education institutions are underprepared for the demands of higher education (Isarji Sarudin et al., 2008; Rosemala Ismail, 2008; Razianna Abdul Rahman, 2005; Perin, 2004). Clearly, many students underestimate the academic literacy requirement for successful university study.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

1.2.1 The EFL Student at the Private University

The research problem concerns the need to cognise the challenges that the EFL student faces when reading academic texts at the university level. To fully grasp the problem of the struggling reader at the university, an appreciation of the context could be useful. In this instance, English is not the language that he typically uses. In other words, English is not his lingua franca. As such, he is disadvantaged from the onset of his university study.

Many of the students at the private university in Malaysia, where this present study was conducted, are EFL students. Transition from secondary school to the university can be difficult for any EFL student because there are several important potential issues. One of the crucial issues is that the standard of English literacy of incoming EFL students tends to be lower than that required at university.

This shortcoming could be attributed to the fact that most schools used the national language of the country, as the medium of instruction, be it Bahasa Malaysia (BM), in the case of Malaysia, or the Chinese language (CL), in the case of students





from China. In Malaysia, there are also vernacular schools, where the medium of instruction is the CL.

In most instances, English is taught in these schools as a classroom subject. Whatever practice the students get in the use of the language is confined to the classroom. There is no social milieu in which English is used. This being the case, it is highly unlikely that the critical mass Krashen referred to as “Comprehensible Input,” be it by way of listening or reading, could occur (Krashen, 1985). Outside the English language classroom, the learners revert to their own national language or mother tongue.

For the EFL student with poor English reading and writing skills, the lived experience of being confronted by the demands for advanced reading at the university could be particularly daunting, especially if support is not forthcoming from a More Knowledgeable Other, or MKO, (Vygotsky, 1978). The MKO could be the course instructor involved, or a fellow student who has more knowledge than someone else in the cohort.

1.2.2 English as the Medium of Instruction

To be able to receive instruction at the university, students should be proficient in its medium of instruction. As English is the medium of instruction in most private universities in Malaysia, it becomes the gateway to education at the university. To be sure, the English that is used in teaching and learning is complicated. Practically all spoken, aural, reading, and writing at the university is in English. The ramifications of



academic literacy for the struggling reader would be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

A related issue is that the medium of instruction nowadays is not confined to the lecture hall and the university's discussion rooms. English is also the language used in most online resources. The issue is further worsened by the pervasive use of the English in digital technology, which is increasingly used by course instructors to complement textbooks and lecture notes. Therefore, unlike in previous era, teaching and learning today is not confined to listening to lectures and reading hardcopy textbooks.

Digital technology has transformed the means of knowledge transfer and gathering of information in many universities. Virtually all the databases in the content areas are mounted in English. This has made English reading proficiency an indispensable requirement for effective online content knowledge transfer.

To stress the point, the use of the computer and online learning are no longer options. The traditional mode of knowledge transfer through face-to-face modality in lecture halls has largely been modified. A study revealed that eleven institutions of higher learning in Malaysia currently effect content area transfers in more than half of their courses through e-learning. Over 14% of instructors utilize over 80% of the learning materials from online sources (Norazah et al., 2011). With each passing year, this percentage increases.