

# Exploring the Roles of Extensive Reading on Malaysian Tertiary ESL Students' Motivation to Read in English

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## Abstract

English language reading skills and reading motivation are important in tertiary education. In the case of Malaysian tertiary education, most courses are conducted in English language and most references are in English. However, Malaysian tertiary students' reading proficiency in English has often been labelled as below par, which is attributed to poor reading skills and habits, as well as a lack of motivation to read. One of the ways that can increase their reading habits and motivation is extensive reading. This qualitative study explores Malaysian tertiary ESL students' perceptions of extensive reading, the roles that extensive reading play in developing (or hindering) their reading motivation, as well as the factors that contribute to (or hinder) their motivation for reading. Employing a case study approach, three tertiary ESL students from three private institutes of higher learning in Klang Valley were selected via purposive sampling. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, and the participants' reading journal entries were collected, and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that extensive reading was perceived to have great value, and it played important roles that developed participants' motivation to read. However, sociocultural factors contribute to increasing or decreasing students' motivation to read. It was found that students' motivation to read can be developed and sustained when they believe in the value of extensive reading, have high expectancy for success at reading, and enjoy reading for its own sake as evidenced by their reports of experiencing flow while reading. The study also provide a better understanding of what drives students to read or hinders them from reading, which could allow valuable insight into motivating alliterates to read.

**Keywords:** Extensive Reading, Reading Habits, Reading Motivation, Reading Skills, Tertiary ESL Students

## Introduction

Reading is a skill that is essential for learning and gaining new knowledge, and positive reading habits are seen to be the foundation of knowledge. From a survey conducted in March 2019 by Picodi.com (a global e-commerce platform), it was found that Malaysia was one of the biggest spenders on books, placed at sixth place among 41 countries. However, the

statistics could not be taken to reflect the reading habits of the respondents as it only took into consideration the purchasing of books. Results of a study published by Statista Research Department (2018) on the types of publications read by Malaysians in 2018, involving 121,000 respondents 18 years and older, showed that only 7.22 percent of the respondents read morning newspapers.

Furthermore, Sidek (2011) further opined that based on the 1995 study by Mustapha, which found that many 'fluent' readers at the tertiary level had poor reading comprehension, Malaysian tertiary students would not be able to read academically because they are not self-regulated readers.

At the tertiary level, ESL/EFL students do not have adequate opportunity to develop their reading motivation. The reading is chosen by teachers, not students, and teachers dictate when and how students read. These reading periods are focused on intensive reading, in which students spend most of time analysing and dissecting short and difficult texts, which according to Day and Bamford (1998), is not sufficient to produce good, fluent, motivated readers. The problem of lack of good reading habits and poor reading motivation is further exacerbated by a preference for other activities. Ahmed (2016) found that the majority of the undergraduates at a Malaysian public university would rather browse the internet or watch television than read when they had time. Findings from the study also showed that the majority of respondents are reluctant ESL readers and lack proper reading habits for both intensive and extensive reading, which affect their overall proficiency in English. Malaysian students often only read textbooks to help them with their studies and in preparation of examinations. Reading for pleasure is not practised, and sometimes is discouraged by parents as it is considered a waste of time (Norazit & Fatimah, 1992, as cited in Mansor, 2017) especially in favour for revising for examination rather than reading for pleasure. A low level of motivation to read in English is apparent in students in Malaysia even when they have access to reading materials. And according to Mansor (2017), there is no 'constructive effort' to encourage them to read more in English to develop their language and reading ability. Mansor (2017) also found that the reading habits of 90% of the form 6 students involved in the study were described as bad or poor.

It is possible to change the reading habits and attitudes of tertiary students through their college reading experiences (Applegate & Applegate, 2004), which involves teachers using teaching strategies and creating classroom environments that encourage students to read. To improve students' intrinsic reading motivation and encourage them to be active readers, Sani et al. (2011) suggest that teachers should introduce students to interesting books and materials that are within their reading level, and include activities that 'increase the dimensions of Challenge, Involvement, Social and Self-efficacy'. The first suggestion echoes some of the principles of extensive reading, which involves students reading a large quantity of interesting and easy materials that are within the students' linguistic competence (Day & Bamford, 2002). However, despite encouraging findings from studies on extensive reading and its effects on English proficiency (Nakanishi, 2015; Suk, 2016; Tan, Pandian & Jaganathan, 2018; Tan & Kasuma, 2019; Boutorwick et al., 2019), as well as its positive effect on motivation to read (Tanaka, 2015; McLean & Poulshock, 2018; Tan & Kasuma, 2019), extensive reading is still very much lacking in tertiary institutions in Malaysia. Therefore, the present study aims to provide an in-depth and detailed description of individual experiences of learners who engage in extensive reading and their reading motivation, and by doing so attempts to close the gap of limited qualitative studies.

**Impact of Extensive Reading on ESL Reading Motivation**

Many studies suggest that ER has a positive impact on L2 reading motivation. Ro (2013) identified several 'unique contributing factors for motivational enhancement', convenience or accessibility of ER; satisfaction gain from completing English books; and realisation of ER's usefulness or value. Results from Leung (2002) indicated that the opportunity to read extensively for pleasure helped the learner to develop a passion for reading and the learner was motivated to improve her reading proficiency in order to understand books she was interested in. Among the factors that may contribute to L2 reading motivation is the compatibility of the text with the participants' L2 reading proficiency. Findings from Tanaka and Stapleton (2007) showed that the experimental group were positive towards ER as they found the graded text used were easier to read than the textbook they were using in class. Furthermore, learners have also been known to like books that are more difficult if they find the content more meaningful (Chiu, 2015).

Bautista and Marulanda's (2018) study to investigate whether a free voluntary reading programme could affect students' interest in reading and reading frequency also found that after the intervention there was an increase of 62% of students with improved attitude toward voluntary reading. In a study conducted in a Malaysian public university, remedial English language learners who experienced Sustained Independent Reading (SIR) indicated that they felt more motivated to read in English (Tan & Kasuma, 2019). Many participants indicated that the calm setting of the SIR was also a factor as they felt 'more relaxed when reading', and 92% of them expressed interest to continue reading in English in the future.

Longitudinal studies that investigated L2 reading motivation change (see Nishino, 2007; Judge 2011) found links between ER and motivation to read. Nishino (2007) reported that a sense of achievement, the pleasure and flow of reading, confidence in L2 reading, and interest in the reading materials enhanced the participants' intrinsic motivation to read. Judge (2011) found that the two strongest themes that emerged from the data were love of literacy since early youth and the appeal of autonomy. The participants indicated that being able to choose what they read, when, where and how much they read was one of the main reasons they enjoyed the ER programme. Similarly, Takase (2007) emphasized that the choice in reading contributed to the participants' motivation to read and thus enhanced their ER accomplishment. Findings from Tanaka (2017) also showed that learners' perceived autonomy increased intrinsic motivation, and that providing them with choice gave them a sense of control over reading.

While many studies have shown that ER is an approach that could motivate students to read in some cases, it is important to note that many of the studies within the past five years reviewed were quantitative studies to measure whether ER has any impact on either reading proficiency or reading motivation. Few actually gathered information directly and in depth from participants to understand why they claim to be motivated to read and whether this translates to a robust reading habit where they will continue to read even if it is not a requirement of their respective courses.

Taking into consideration the need for understanding students' reading motivation (or lack of it) from their own points of view, this study's objectives are to explore the perceptions of three ESL students in Malaysian private institutes of higher learning of their experiences of reading extensively, to investigate the roles of extensive reading on their reading motivation, and to understand factors that contribute to their reading motivation (or lack thereof). As such, this study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. How do tertiary ESL students perceive the roles of extensive reading in their motivation to read?
2. What are the roles that ER play in developing (or hindering) tertiary ESL students' motivation to read?
3. What factors contribute to tertiary ESL students' reading motivation?

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative case study research method as it provides opportunities to obtain a holistic view of the research problem with an aim to explore, explain, understand and describe the research problem (Tellis, 1997). According to Yin (2003) the case study design has a distinct advantage when "a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 9). As the purpose of this study is to explore the perception of tertiary students toward ER, the roles of ER on their reading motivation, and factors that contribute to their motivation to read, using case study methodology will enable the researcher to explore, understand and present the participants' views in their natural setting.

### **Participant Selection**

Purposive sampling method was used to choose three students from three different private tertiary institutions through recommendation from their English language teachers or instructors, who are known to the researcher, as they would be the best informed of their students' habit of reading in English. The selection criteria that students would need to meet to be included in the study are that they need to (i) read as much as possible regularly for the purpose of pleasure or knowledge or general understanding, and not because of coursework requirement; and (ii) have the practice of keeping a writing journal to record their thoughts and feelings about their reading, or are willing to do so for the duration of two months. The three participants selected were briefed about the nature of the study and their rights were explained to them before they signed the consent forms. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' names to protect the anonymity of each participant.

Participant 1 (Sue Lin) is a 20-year-old Malaysian of Chinese descent and studying for a bachelor's degree in computer science in a private university in the Klang Valley. She attended Chinese vernacular schools throughout her primary and secondary school years, and grew up in a Chinese-speaking environment. During semester breaks, she reads around one or two novels per week. She usually doesn't read anything during the semester unless she doesn't feel like doing school work. An estimate of how much reading she does over the course of a 3-month semester is about one to two books.

Participant 2 (Lena), a 19-year-old Malaysian of Indian descent, is pursuing her Bachelor's in Education for Teaching English as a Second Language in a private university in the Klang Valley. She was born in the United Kingdom and was home-schooled there until her family's return to Malaysia and she was enrolled in a public primary school. She speaks both Tamil and English at home. She is a disciplined reader and would set aside two hours every night to read.

Participant 3 (Kamala) is 22 years old and a Malaysian of Indian ethnicity. She is studying for a diploma in medical sciences at a private university college in the Klang Valley. She grew up in Sabah and attended public schools there for her primary and secondary education. She speaks English, Tamil and Malay languages at home with her family, and Hindi with her online

friends. She usually reads at night when she is alone, but the duration varies from half an hour to through the night till 6 in the morning.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected from one-to-one semi-structured online interviews and their reading journals. The researchers conducted three interviews with each participant within a two-month period. The first interview was to obtain background information of the participants and their perceptions on extensive reading. The second interview focused on the participants' practice of extensive reading, such as their choice of reading material (i.e., genre, type, difficulty level), frequency and duration of reading, and changes in reading habits and motivation (if any) and their rationales for engaging in extensive reading. Participants were also asked their reasons for reading extensively to understand whether they are reading for their own enjoyment, as a requirement for their programme or for some other reasons. The final interview explored the participants' reflections on their practice of reading extensively including any issues they may have, as well as their recommendations of its practice, such as their feelings and experiences while reading extensively and the conditions under which those feelings and experiences occur, difficulties they might have faced with extensive reading and factors that might influence their reading motivation, and their opinion about the importance of extensive reading to tertiary students. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and were transcribed verbatim after each interview.

The second data collection method used was the reading journals kept by the participants. The researcher asked the participants to keep track of their extensive reading habits and also to record and reflect on their extensive reading habits, where they contemplate their experiences while reading, and record their reactions to what was read, including their thoughts and emotions. For this purpose, prompts that relate to participants' perception in accessing text, interest in the text chosen, etc. were given by the researchers to guide the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts and participants' reading journals were analysed using thematic content analysis to find common patterns across all the interviews and reading journals. Following the six phases of thematic content analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researchers marked preliminary ideas for codes to describe the content in the first phase. Then, codes or labels were assigned to the text to organise the data into meaningful groups. In the third phase, the list of codes and text organised in Phase 2 was interpreted and sorted into themes. The next phase involved reviewing and refining the themes identified in Phase 3. This iterative process was conducted until the researchers were satisfied that the set of themes was coherent and distinctive, and represented the data accurately. Phase 5 involved naming the themes identified in Phase 4 in a descriptive and engaging manner. In describing the themes, the researchers identified how each theme relates to the other themes and to the research questions, and that the themes told a coherent story. In the sixth and final phase, description of the themes was used as the basis of the write-up and quotes from the participants were used to demonstrate and justify the findings.

## Findings and Discussion

### RQ1: ESL Tertiary Students' Perceptions of the Roles of Extensive Reading in Their Motivation to Read?

Three main themes were identified in relation to the participants' perception of the roles of extensive reading in their motivation to read:

#### Extensive Reading Improves English Proficiency and Content Knowledge

All three participants commented that they have noticed improvement in their English proficiency in terms of the size of their vocabulary, skills such as reading, writing and speaking, and a better grasp of grammar, and they also noted this in their journal entries. For instance, Sue Lin recognised that reading extensively has helped her master grammar in a less painful way as she observed: "in class, teacher would like teach you this is how we do grammar ... it's actually hard to apply right when the teacher teaches you like that unless you have experienced it a lot yourself."

The improved proficiency in English gained through extensive reading also had an impact on school results. Lena and Sue Lin started reading extensively during their primary school years, while Kamala started when she was 14 or 15 years old. All three participants obtained 'A's for their English language papers in their past public examinations (UPSR, PT3 and SPM for Lena and Sue Lin; UPSR, PMR, SPM and MUET for Kamala), and also scored 'A's or High Distinctions in English papers at their respective institutions of higher education. Exposure to written input over long periods of time may have facilitated the participants' incidental vocabulary acquisition. Although the participants were not reading graded readers with controlled lexis and grammar, the authentic reading materials that the participants read still allowed them to learn words from multiple exposures or from context. Consistent exposure not only to lexis, but also syntax has helped at mastering grammar. For instance, Lena reported,

I recalled not knowing the exact meaning of the word 'formidable' when I last read this book at 17... but as I read the sentence yesterday, I was able to understand the sentence as well as the word... (Lena, Journal entry #1)

The participants also noted that they had expanded and deepened their content knowledge due to their extensive reading practice. They see extensive reading as a way to gain information and knowledge that they otherwise would not have had access to. As Kamala said, she "learnt more things through reading", while Lena compared what she had gained with the level of knowledge of others: "People, like some of my classmates, they don't know some of the things that I know, which makes me feel better like I know something that they don't..."

The perceived improvements in language and content knowledge may have led to the participants' beliefs about the effectiveness of extensive reading and its value in helping them perform well in their studies and thus their motivation to read more, which is consistent with the findings of Ro (2013), and this also relates to the value component in (Day and Bamford's L2 reading motivation model 1998).

### Extensive Reading Builds Character and Self-growth

The participants view that reading extensively exposes them to different perspectives and viewpoints through the stories or other texts they read, and this had enabled them to gain insights on how to improve themselves as a person and build their own traits as a human being. Lena believed that moral values portrayed in stories and poems build character in readers:

Just as how the boy slayed The Jabberwocky single-handedly in Lewis Carroll's poem, *The Jabberwock*. The readers would be taught to be brave and to always face any hard or scary situation with their heads high and with courage. (Journal entry #3)

Sue Lin also shared similar insights and life lessons she had gained from her readings:

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dangerous Liaisons* really taught me the danger of being self-absorbed and vain. The main characters in those books ultimately met their downfall for being too in love with themselves. So in real life, sometimes I take a step back and reflect whether I'm being too self-centred and think about others before I act. Also, *The Little Prince* taught me to find beauty in simple things and not become too jaded. As a very negative person, I often get really frustrated about life. *The Little Prince* is a gentle reminder that having a meaningful life isn't about pursuing superficial things, but finding beauty in simple things (Email Communication, 2020)

Kamala, Who Described Herself as Someone Who Used to be Painfully Shy, Attributed her Change in Character To Reading

I think it [reading] kind of affected my personality more than anything ... I was that type of girl who gets bullied... but now I feel like I'm standing out more. I feel like I should speak out... Like the characters in the stories that teach me how to go through these. (Interview session #1)

In addition, Kamala noted that reading has also made her more accepting of who she is as the fan fiction that she read was based on "girls who are not perfect, girls who are fat, and girls who are dark". She said, "It gave me like hope, oh it's ok, I'm not alone. There are people outside who are like me." Reading has also helped Kamala accept her illness as part of who she is. She disclosed in a journal entry:

As being someone who has illness myself, this book has taught me how to love myself and move on from the past just like Hazel did after Gus dies... life goes on no matter what happened. (Journal entry #6)

As the participants reflected on their reading and the changes they had noticed within themselves, they have come to realise that reading about people, culture and perhaps a world that is different from what they have been exposed to thus far has given them greater world views and perspectives. From reading about other people's experiences to the participants realise that they are not alone in their experiences and at the same time increase their understanding of people from different backgrounds and cultures. The changes and self-growth that participants noticed within themselves that they attribute to reading extensively may have contributed to their reading motivation as it represents the perceived value

attached to performing a task (L2 Reading Motivation Model by Day & Bamford, 1998). The results revealed that participants also place great importance in development of other areas through extensive reading

### **Extensive Reading is Its Own Reward**

The participants see reading as something they choose to do of their own free will because of the pleasure it brings. Lena explained, “you do it for your own leisure, you do it on your own wish...” she described her feelings about reading in one of her journal entries:

I do not read as a task, even if it is a task given by my teacher, I take my time in doing it. I read to understand, not to memorise... I love reading for the adventures that I go on and the feelings that I can feel. (Journal entry #2)

Sue Lin concurred, indicating that reading is a good activity on which to spend some time alone. She wrote in her journal after reading *Rebecca*:

Towards the end I was savouring it because I didn't want it to end... I really, really loved this. I can see myself rereading this in the future and getting something different out of it. (Journal entry #4)

The participants enjoyed reading so much that they described incidents when they were lost in the stories. Sue Lin shared her past fascination with the fantasy genre, such as the Harry Potter series: “It was like going to Hogwarts... J.K. Rowling crafted the atmosphere very well, so I was quite immersed...” Kamala also explained what was going on internally when she reads something engaging: “I don't feel like I'm in where I am... I think like I'm in my own world.”

Findings from the interview data and the reading journal entries demonstrated that the participants experienced pleasure, which is consistent with those of Leung (2002) who reported that reading for pleasure helped the participant to develop a passion for reading. The participants were also ‘in the zone’ when they were reading as they described instances where they were so absorbed in their reading that they “lost track of time” or they were lost in their own worlds. In addition, reading is an autotelic experience for them as all participants reported that they read because they wanted to, and not because of external pressure to do so. The participants’ experiences of losing time and being in a world of their own indicate that they had been experiencing ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh & Nakamura, 2005) when they were engaged in reading. This finding indicates that the flow experience plays a major role in the participants’ motivation to read.

### **RQ2: Roles That Extensive Reading Play in Developing (or Hindering) ESL Tertiary Students’ Motivation to Read**

The roles that extensive reading play in developing (or hindering) the participants’ motivation to read were categorised into four main themes:

#### **Extensive Reading Provides Learners with Opportunities to Read What They Want**

Even though the participants have different preferences when it comes to reading genres and materials, all have one thing in common – they pick reading materials for specific reasons and from various sources, such as libraries, online platforms, and recommendation



from friends or social media. In fact, Sue Lin pointed out that assigned reading by teachers is not a good idea as it was often uninteresting to her. For Lena, who likes children's books, a good plot is essential. She further shared that she has started reading more informational type of materials such as newspaper articles once she entered university to know "what's happening in other countries".

Reading to supplement course materials was also frequently done, as Lena observed, "Some subjects I feel like it's not enough... and I start searching for my own notes online..." Kamala also does the same thing as she explains why she reads journal articles, "...it helps me to understand my subjects better... sometimes the things that the lecturers deliver to us is not really complete."

Participants also reported choosing reading materials which challenge their personal views and help them gain wider perspectives. Sue Lin who used to read primarily young adult books for fun during her secondary school days made a conscious change to her reading choices to "more thought-provoking things that can challenge" her "world view" as she didn't want to limit herself to only young adult material. From "very easy to read" and "addictive storylines", she now prefers literary fiction and historical fiction, or genres that are outside of her comfort zone. When questioned on her rationale for the change, she reflected: "I think sometimes it's good to feel uncomfortable... it's good to be challenged... to put myself in other people's shoes... it's very hard to hate them if you understand where they are coming from." She illustrated this point by sharing her insights from books she read that explored difficult and sometimes taboo subjects:

...when someone is feeling suicidal right, we always tend to say suicide is not the solution. But when you're in the head of someone who is suffering so much, maybe suicide is the only way to end their suffering... So I think it's very interesting to be in the shoes of someone like that... sometimes the characters are like very different from me, so I can understand people in different circumstances better." (Interview session #2)

The reading journals kept by the participants also reinforced the point that their reading often challenges their personal views and offers them different perspectives. Kamala, who is usually shy, wrote about thinking of getting out of her comfort zone:

There is a quote by Margo that really made me think a lot. "*Your comfort zone is right here (too small), all the things you want are way out there.*" We tend to be satisfied by what we know and what we are used to having. We are usually reluctant to try new things and this way we lose out a lot in life. Life is meant to be explored and lived to the fullest. (Journal entry #2)

Having a choice in what they read played a crucial role not only in sparking their motivation to read, but also in sustaining it through the years. This finding is in accordance with findings reported by Takase (2007); Judge (2011) that L2 reading motivation is most influenced by students' freedom to choose what to read, when, where and how much they read. The importance of student autonomy in their reading selection is also in line with findings from Tanaka (2017), which indicated that providing students with the choice of what to read gave them a sense of control over reading. The autonomy in material selection the participants enjoy enabled them to have control over their reading and this fulfilled one of the conditions for them to experience flow.

### **Extensive Reading Enables Reading within or Slightly above Level of Linguistic Competence**

Participants expressed a preference for reading materials that are at a moderate level – not too easy and not too difficult. That said, while Sue Lin disclosed that it takes her “longer to read something that is more difficult to read”, it won’t hinder her motivation to read because now she really likes “the conscious stylistic choices” authors make in their writing. Apart from difficulty arising from disparity in level of reading competence, difficulty with or lack of knowledge in certain subject areas may also pose challenges while reading. An account from Sue Lin’s reading journal revealed that she tends to struggle with the non-fiction genre, but still picked up books on history because of her interest in the subject. She wrote:

A lot of the details that Harari used to make his arguments just completely went over my head, mostly because there are a lot of gaps in my history knowledge, but it didn’t hinder me from understanding his take on certain historical events in the grand scheme of things. (Journal entry #2)

Compatibility of text with L2 reading proficiency as a contributor to L2 reading motivation is consistent with the findings of (Tanaka and Stapleton, 2007). In addition, when the level of difficulty of the text matches the reading proficiency, the reader can expect to do well in the task, which is reading, and this could motivate them to read. This relates to the expectancy component in Day and Bamford’s L2 Reading Motivation Model (1998).

In this regard if the subject of the text is of interest to the reader, the level of difficulty would not be a demotivator, but would instead drive the reader to improve reading proficiency in order to understand the text. This finding is similar to that of Leung (2002), who reported that the participant was motivated to improve her own reading proficiency to understand books she was interested in. This also corroborates the findings in Chiu (2015) that learners could like books that are above their linguistic ability if the content is meaningful to them and they have a reason to read.

The participants also preferred reading something they can understand and at the same time improve their vocabulary range and knowledge. After feeling comfortable with a level, they would progress to a more difficult level to challenge themselves. Lena prefers to read something moderate first, and then move on to read texts which she “wouldn’t understand quite easily, like *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Masque of the Red Death*”. In Sue Lin’s case, if she finds a book too difficult, she would not give up on reading it, but instead would revisit it after a period of time. She explained that she found it difficult to read *The Great Gatsby* when she was 14 or 15, but when she picked it up again the previous year, she thought it was very easy, and said, “I think you just need to like wait for it to become the time for you to read that book.” When participants have mastered a level of difficulty, they would read texts that are a little more difficult to keep themselves challenged in order not to feel bored. This means they are constantly chasing the flow experience, which could be a factor in their motivation to read.

### **Extensive Reading Facilitates Personal Relevance and Connection**

All the participants connected their reading motivation with being able to relate to the material in some way. They reported experiences of emotional connection with the content or attachment to characters and resonance with the author’s voice. The emotional connection that participants had with the material was also evidenced by these accounts in their reading journals. After reading a story in which one of the characters was bullied, and perhaps relating it to her own experiences of being bullied in school, Kamala wrote:

Never tolerate bullying. The teacher addressed the domineering jerks, and it truly felt better... we shouldn't endure and simply watch them harassing others. (Journal entry #3)

Sue Lin also wrote about having the same views and feelings portrayed in the material she read:

The novel also shows that the people around you only care if the people around them are conforming to societal norms instead of minding their own business, which I completely agree. It was nice having my feelings validated and to see someone put my feelings into words. (Journal entry #3)

The feeling of being invested in a character or attachment to a character is also a big factor on their reading experiences. For Lena, she felt like she could “relate to them” and she would “try to understand another person” and understand what they went through. Sue Lin wrote in her reading journal about how she was able to relate to a character in a book because of similarities they both have:

I find myself relating to the main character, Keiko a lot. Mainly during the times that the people around her was trying to “fix” her for not wanting a “proper” job or getting married. I was able to empathize with her as people have told me that my life has no meaning when I said I don't want to have children. (Journal entry #3)

This feeling of camaraderie with a character in a story was also noted by Lena:

I felt every feeling Matilda felt. If she was mad, so was I. If she was sad, so was I. If she was happy, so was I... Matilda loved reading as much as I do; she had visited the library to borrow a bunch of books as how I used to borrow so many books on my trip to the public library as a child... (Journal entry #1)

This points to the importance of the role of reading materials in the participants' motivation to read. Not only must the topic or subject be interesting to the participants, but participants also need to feel an emotional and personal connection with the text, or characters. Reading can be reassuring and make readers more comfortable and accepting of who they are, and how they think and feel. The same reading material or text could also evoke very different feelings and emotions in different readers. Coincidentally, Kamala and Sue Lin had read the same book, *Simon Versus the Homosapiens Agenda*; one found it light-hearted and a happy read, while the other saw herself in the protagonist with whom she shared similar issues in life.

The participants also emphasized the importance of the author's voice in helping or hindering their connection with the reading material. Author's voice, defined as the synthesis of style (diction and syntax), tone (a speaker's attitude towards an utterance) and values (ideological and ethical) (Phelan, 2014), was referred to by the participants in terms of “writing style” and “skill” when they reflected on their reading experiences and how these elements help them to appreciate the text emotionally, aesthetically and intellectually. Sue Lin shared her thoughts of reading books written by her favourite authors:

I think their styles are very beautiful, but they are like beautiful in different ways. Donna Tartt is... very descriptive and a bit pretentious I'd say, but I really like her style because it's really immersive... Sally Rooney, her writing style is very

simple... when her characters they're having conversations right, it's very like in your head. And both of them, they make social commentaries in their fiction, so I really enjoy that. (Interview session #2)

Lena also prefers specific authors' styles for the different genres she reads. When choosing books to read, she would pick the author instead of the "story type", saying that her favourite Victorian author is Jane Austen, and for children's books, it is Roald Dahl for his "amazing creativity". While for Kamala, issues being conveyed from a different perspective by authors made her reading experience more fulfilling. An excerpt from her journal entry states:

The novel is not a stale, depressing tale of people with cancer. The way the author injected humour in the conversations and dialogues is a fresh twist in understanding the emotions felt by people with cancer and their families involved... (Journal entry #6)

Findings from the study suggest that the participants had taken an 'aesthetic stance' while reading. The 'aesthetic stance' is defined by Rosenblatt (1986) as the "attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through in relation to the text during the reading event" and the reader who adopts this stance experiences connections through feelings and emotions, attitudes, ideas, and personalities produced by transaction with the text.

Without these elements of relatability and emotional connection experienced while reading, students may not be motivated to read even though the reading material is at an appropriate level for them to understand. Findings from the study also indicate that reading materials need to be more than interesting. They need to resonate with readers in terms of content, character or aesthetic value from the perspective of the reader. The connection that readers feel toward the text can be a powerful motivator.

### **Extensive Reading Promotes the Flow Experience and Immersion in Text**

'Flow' refers to the subjective state in which people are completely involved in a task to the extent that everything else is forgotten except the task itself (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh & Nakamura, 2005), and flow has been widely reported in reading (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi & Fave, 1988, as cited in McQuillan & Conde, 1996). When describing their reading experiences, the participants often referred to their experience as immersive and that they were totally absorbed in the reading activity. Their intense engagement in the texts they were reading was to the extent that time was forgotten, and awareness of self, surroundings and problems was reduced.

All participants had mentioned instances where they had become less aware of themselves and their problems while reading. Sue Lin recalled reading a book recently during the movement control order and it had helped her "escape from the Covid19 world". Kamala also credited reading for helping her "escape reality" when she was bullied in school. For Lena, reading was a "stress reliever" whenever she felt overwhelmed with her studies.

This experience of being less aware of themselves occurred when the participants were reading fiction. In particular, for Sue Lin, she doesn't become less aware of herself when reading "realistic fiction", but does so when reading more "escapist kind of fiction". She compared two books she read:

The book I'm currently reading is called *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, and it's like a fantasy... So I become less aware... But if it's something more realistic, like... *Emma*, by Jane Austen... that's a book about a very flawed protagonist... I can see myself in her because of her flaws, so I become more aware of myself in a way. (Interview session #3)

Lena also talked about her experience of being oblivious to her surroundings when she was reading:

...there are times when I read something and I'm very stuck into the book. I'm like imagining the whole situation is happening in front of me... If my mom calls me from the kitchen, I wouldn't even like hear her... (Interview session #3)

This is consistent with findings of previous studies that flow experience had occurred while reading (Massimini et al., 1988 as cited in McQuillan & Conde, 1996). The participants recalled having experienced flow (it has to be noted that participants referred to their experience as immersion and not flow in their interviews which could be due to their unfamiliarity with the term 'flow') when they were reading fiction which were self-selected. This is consistent with the findings of McQuillan and Conde (1996) that texts that were more likely to induce flow were self-selected fiction.

As the immersion in reading has caused the participants some problems due to their altered sense of time, they had self-imposed some restrictions on when and how much they read. Lena set rules for herself, allowing only a two-hour reading time every night before she sleeps. Kamala also plans her reading time in advance and allocates time for her assignments. Sue Lin is more in control in managing her time for reading as she mostly reads extensively during her semester breaks.

Because the participants felt the need for measures to limit reading, this can be taken to indicate that flow could positively affect their motivation to read. This contradicts the findings of Kirchhoff's (2013 study), which did not find a relationship between flow while reading and motivation to spend time reading. Although this does not constitute conclusive evidence for the positive relationship between flow and motivation to read, it indicates that more studies in this area is warranted.

### **RQ3: Factors That Contribute to ESL Tertiary Students' Reading Motivation (or Lack Thereof)**

Factors that contribute to ESL tertiary students' reading motivation (or lack thereof) could be categorised under the main theme of sociocultural factors, which include study commitments and the influence of other people and pop culture to inform their extensive reading habits.

#### **Sociocultural Factors and Reading Motivation**

Sue Lin and Kamala shared that the demands of the university and their studies had impacted their reading motivation and decision to read. Activities associated with university life, such as attending lectures, working on assignments, and studying for examinations have taken a toll on their reading motivation. Lena, on the other hand, had kept to a routine of reading every night before going to bed even with a heavier workload at university.

Time constraints due to the demands of assignments, studies and examinations reduce the amount of time students engage in extensive reading. In this study, two participants, who were adapting to academic life at university, reported a reduction in reading time during the

semester. However, they would often catch up on reading during their semester breaks, indicating that their reading motivation has a negative relationship with their study workload. The findings from the current study implies that the participants' reading motivation fluctuates according to the demands on their time due to university commitments.

The influence of other people or pop culture also played an integral part on the reading motivation of the participants. These could be people in the participants' social circle such as friends and family, or even random people who are not personally known to the participants. Fights and arguments with friends and family affect Kamala tremendously and disrupt her reading sessions. She shared that she gets emotional whenever conflicts happen and loses her "focus to read". Lena too is affected as she would be motivated to read when she sees other people reading. In Sue Lin's case, pop culture has influenced her reading motivation. Her interest in Korean dramas had rekindled her motivation in reading books that are connected in some way with what she had watched or planned to watch:

I tried to read this last year but got busy and had to put the book down, but I picked it up again because of the ongoing Korean drama, *Backstreet Rookie*... and I wanted to get into the mood to watch it. (Journal entry #3)

In another journal entry, she explained why she decided to read *The Art of War by Sun Tzu*: I suddenly had a strong urge to read this because I've recently finished watching the Korean drama, *Empress Ki*, which referenced this text a lot of times. (Journal entry #5)

Kamala also wrote in her journal entries that she decided to read certain books after watching their movie adaptations. She commented in her journal entry after reading *The Princess Diaries* that she had bought the book because she was a big fan of Anne Hathaway, the star of the movie.

The above findings suggest that apart from the need for a conducive physical space for extensive reading, a favourable emotional and psychological space is also vital. Reading books that are related to movies or TV dramas that the participants enjoyed or anticipate to enjoy in the future added to their entertainment experience.

## Conclusion

Research on the students' perception of extensive reading, and how extensive reading and other factors contribute to reading motivation is important because more in-depth understanding can be achieved about the students' motivation (or lack of) to read. Findings of the three research questions of the study suggest that students' motivation to read can be developed and sustained when they believe in the value of extensive reading, have high expectancy for success at reading, and enjoy reading for its own sake as evidenced by their reports of experiencing flow while reading. The findings of this study also provide a better understanding of what drives students to read or hinders them from reading, which could allow valuable insight into motivating alliterates to read. The researchers believe that by understanding these factors that positively or negatively affect students' reading motivation, stakeholders such as teachers/lecturers, administrators, and curriculum developers would be able to provide the necessary elements for nurturing tertiary students to be self-motivated prolific readers.

### Suggestions and Implications

Participants of this study enjoyed aesthetic reading which had a positive influence on their motivation to read. Facilitating students to engage in aesthetic reading could help them cultivate reading as an autotelic experience, and enjoyment of the reading activity may lead to students experiencing flow which could motivate them to read more. When students are encouraged to read with an aesthetic approach, they will be more likely to share their interpretation with their classmates instead of waiting for the teacher to provide the 'correct' interpretation. They will be able to connect with the texts and relate their life experiences with insights from the texts they read.

Participants' interest in diverse subjects, even those deemed controversial or taboo, indicate a need for schools and universities to provide access to a wider variety of books to motivate students to read. Graded readers, which are often the only type of non-academic reading found in university libraries for learners of English as a second language, may not be enough to inspire students to be avid readers. University students are young adults who have diverse interests and world views, and interesting titles would need to be included in libraries to get them to read and to continue reading.

Finally, the participants are autonomous readers who found reading materials they enjoy from various sources, such as websites, and through recommendations from others on social media. However, for learners who have yet to become autonomous readers, the teacher or lecturer plays a very important role in introducing reading materials to students. Apart from knowledge of books available in university libraries, teachers or lecturers need to be well read and familiar with books or reading materials from other sources such as those available online that would interest young adults, and also suggest suitable titles to their students.

Hence, these factors need to be considered if we are serious about building a nation of autonomous readers. Reading motivation could be enhanced when teachers, students and other stakeholders understand the roles extensive reading play in encouraging students to read.

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