

The Effects of Reading Habits on Academic Performance among Students in An ESL Classroom: A Literature Review Paper

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Abstract

Reading holds a key role in personal development and academic success, contributing significantly to knowledge acquisition, vocabulary enhancement, and critical thinking skills. The absence of a reading habit often corresponds with lower performance in English classes, underscoring the need to nurture this skill. This review investigates past studies, using Google Scholar and Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) to explore discussions on challenges in teaching reading in ESL classrooms and the impact of students' reading habits on overall academic success. From a pool of 78 journal articles, 28 were identified as directly relevant to the research questions. Some of the challenges encountered in teaching reading are the extensive use of social media platforms, instructional strategies used, materials selection, and the application of inefficient pedagogical approaches. The digital era further contributes to students' digital distractions, impeding their learning process. Nevertheless, this review reveals a positive connection between consistent reading habits and enhanced academic performance. This review advocates for active involvement from parents, teachers, and policymakers in fostering a love for reading among children, emphasising the enduring benefits of maintaining a regular reading habit. Encouraging and maintaining a regular reading habit emerges as a crucial strategy to positively impact students' academic performance. It is imperative for teachers and parents to monitor their children's use of technology during studies to prevent distractions and ensure its sustainable integration into education. In light of these findings, continuous efforts are recommended to instil and sustain a passion for reading, recognizing its profound influence on students' educational journeys.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Learning Challenges, ESL Classroom, Reading Habits, Malaysian ESL Students

Introduction

The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Malaysia has consistently prioritised the acquisition of English language skills, making it a mandatory subject in both primary and secondary

schools. Starting in 2016, English became a compulsory pass subject in the Malaysian Upper Secondary School Examination (SPM), emphasising its importance for academic advancement. In line with Malaysia's educational policy, English is taught as a secondary language, with efforts focused on transforming it into an asset for the country (Gill, 2002). To achieve this goal, a Roadmap for English Language Education in Malaysia was introduced, spanning from 2015 to 2025. This roadmap aims to implement fundamental changes and structural improvements to enhance the nation's English language proficiency. A significant aspect of this plan is the adoption of the CEFR, a globally recognized benchmark for evaluating language proficiency at all educational levels (Don & Abdullah, 2019). Among the essential skills that English language learners need to develop, reading holds significant importance. Magasvaran et al (2022) emphasised that reading serves as a foundation for other language skills, enabling students to become better writers and speakers. The ability to read impacts learners' capacity to acquire new information effectively. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to foster a reading habit among their students. Teachers are expected to enhance their capacity and potential in order to ensure that authorities and policymakers are able to provide high-quality education (Ukat & Ismail, 2022). As educators, we need to explore various methods and approaches to identify the most effective strategies for our students. It is important not to assume that a single teaching strategy will benefit all students equally. In Malaysia, particularly in suburban and rural areas, some students may be unaware of the importance and benefits of reading.

People read for a variety of reasons and goals including enjoyment, leisure, relaxation, information, and knowledge. Learners often perceive reading as a monotonous and difficult commitment. The reason for this is the imperative need to actively participate in the act of reading in order to efficiently process and understand the written content. Students' motivation to read is clearly limited in today's society, largely due to academic goals such as preparing for examinations or acquiring relevant material for tasks or homework. According to Whitten et al (2016), students seemed to be overly engrossed in social media and technology, had overwhelming workloads, and, most remarkably, 71% of the surveyed individuals expressed a lack of appreciation for reading. The absence of effective reading habits is identified as the primary factor that contributes to students' subpar performance in tests and examinations.

In order to attain exemplary academic outcomes, students must cultivate effective reading and study practices. The contemporary society has witnessed a decline in individuals' inclination towards engaging with written materials such as books, magazines, and journals, due to the pervasive impact of mass media (Palani, 2012). In this context, teachers play a crucial role by providing students with a diverse range of reading materials. By offering appropriate reading resources, students can engage at their own level of understanding and subsequently choose more enjoyable English reading materials. This process fosters self-directed learning. Motivating children to read can encourage regular reading habits and facilitate the development of their reading skills (Chon & Kim, 2019).

Moreover, to foster a positive learning environment, teachers should captivate students' interest by incorporating compelling teaching materials throughout the lesson, creating a sense of ease and security in the teaching and learning process. This approach not only alleviates students' concerns but also cultivates reading motivation. The motivation to read is influenced by students' interests, self-efficacy, and goals, contributing to enhanced comprehension outcomes (Gunasinghe et al., 2020). The importance of reading motivation

can be seen by the way it encourages pupils to read actively, as Patra et al. (2022). Considering reading materials have a direct impact on students' interest in the learning process, choosing them carefully is essential. Lower learning outcomes are more likely to occur when pupils are disengaged. This idea is supported by Schnitzler et al.'s (2021) study, which shows that involvement plays a critical role in predicting student performance. According to their research, pupils who showed signs of disengagement performed considerably worse academically at the end of the year than their peers who showed a range of engagement styles.

However, research on reading habits among Malaysian students is still limited, indicating that many students are unaware of the benefits of reading and lack effective reading strategies to acquire knowledge that can support their academic progress and prepare them for global demands. Mastering comprehension skills is a must in order to enhance their chances in school and employment (Alghonaim, 2020). A considerable number of children today prefer watching TV over reading activities, according to research findings (Loan, 2009). This suggests that the younger generation is spending less time reading books due to the excessive use of modern technologies for activities other than reading. To encourage the formation of effective reading habits, this issue requires the attention and comprehension of parents and other educational stakeholders. The issue dates back to the start of the twenty-first century. The primary cause of the issue is modern technology like television and the Internet, which have taken the role of books as the main source of information. Hence, it is necessary to conduct a study that seeks to identify the challenges in teaching reading in an ESL classroom and the effects of reading habits on students' academic performance. This review shows the importance of cultivating reading habits among students. Therefore, it asks;

- (1) What are the challenges associated with teaching reading in an ESL classroom?
 - (a) How does the current digital age impact students' engagement with reading?
- (2) What are the effects of reading habits on academic performance among students in an ESL classroom?

Methodology

Besides two databases (i.e. Google Scholar and ERIC) to discover journal articles that were connected to reading habits, there were reports from the newspapers included in the review as they served in highlighting the significance of the finding. The selection criteria for the review were based on the guidance of the review question: What are the effects of reading habits on academic performance among students in an ESL classroom?

Three criteria were used to determine the selection process: (1) the use of particular keywords; (2) the year of publication; and (3) the language used in the piece of writing. Several search phrases that are related to research questions were used such as "teaching reading in an ESL classroom", "challenges in teaching reading", "reading habits", "effect of reading habits", "impacts of digital age with students' engagement in reading" and "effects of reading habits on academic performance". These phrases or keywords are important so that only the relevant articles or researches can be identified. The primary search was restricted to full-text journal articles in English. For the timeframe, it was set to within 5 years (2019-2023) in order to find relevant and related articles to the topic. From the search that was done, there were findings from the previous research studies that showed positive effects of reading habits on students' academic performance. However, there were some sources that are from 2016, as

the information is still relevant and consistent with the recent studies. All of the information and data acquired from the articles were generally relevant to the subject of the review paper. At the end of the process, a total of 28 journal articles out of 78 studies related to the review question remained. The findings from the review of the literature give a summary of the research on the effects of reading habits on students' academic performance.

Findings from The Literature Review

Challenges in teaching reading in ESL classrooms

English holds a prominent position as one of the most important and compulsory subjects in Malaysian schools. It has assumed the role of the second language in the country (Gill, 2002). The English Education Roadmap 2015-2025, a component of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, represents the latest reform in English language education, acknowledging the need to transform English from a liability into an asset for the nation. The focus lies on fundamental and structural changes aimed at enhancing the overall proficiency of the English language in the country. A notable aspect of this initiative, as highlighted by Don and Abdullah (2019), is the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), serving as a universal standard to evaluate and describe language proficiency across different educational levels.

Among the four essential skills, reading stands as the foundational skill that needs to be acquired and nurtured at a young age, particularly during primary school years. Its acquisition is crucial as it enables comprehension of written text. Reading comprehension calls for a wide range of competencies as well as some background knowledge from the reader (Elleman & Oslund 2019; Bruggink et al., 2022) The ability of children to comprehend what they read significantly impacts their academic success. Without proficient reading skills, students may struggle to locate and convey information, impeding their understanding of tasks and potentially leading to misunderstandings that hinder their overall learning progress. As stated in the English Language Reform Education in Malaysia, The Roadmap 2015-2025, the ultimate goal of teaching Malaysian children to read English extends beyond word recognition, encompassing the ability to extract meaning from a wide range of English texts, including online materials, textbooks, and everyday written content.

Teaching and reinforcing reading skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms have consistently been difficult for teachers, especially in our current digital age. Unfortunately, the act of reading has transitioned from being propelled by intellectual curiosity to being perceived as a mere task. Leisure activities, such as internet surfing and watching videos, often take priority over reading, indicating a potential lack of awareness regarding the importance of reading for personal development. Due to technological advancements, coupled with the rapid growth of social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Netflix, students frequently find themselves engrossed in their electronic devices and easily drawn to the attraction of these online diversions. The current situation is regrettable, considering that students have the ability to conveniently access reading materials through their mobile phones or gadgets and effectively utilise these technologies to further enhance their knowledge. Samsuddin & Aspura (2021) further supported this by finding that Internet surfing is the most popular leisure activity, ranking first with the highest score (39.3%), followed by watching videos or movies in second place (13.8%). Sharing the third-place spot with an equal score of 11.8 percent are reading and listening to music. These results indicate that a majority of respondents prefer spending their

leisure time on social media sites rather than engaging in reading activities. Regrettably, this outcome suggests that a notable portion of students are not fully aware of the importance of reading for personal development.

The next challenge in teaching reading in an ESL classroom is the instructional strategies used and the materials chosen for lessons. According to Hassan et al. (2021), reading habits have a big impact on a lot of different aspects of reading behaviour, including materials selection. Educators ought to employ a diverse array of instructional methodologies and furnish an extensive assortment of literary resources in order to accommodate the heterogeneous requirements of their pupils. The process of imparting reading skills to students can present various difficulties, underscoring the importance of actively involving students in reading instruction to cultivate their enthusiasm and cultivate a genuine passion for reading. Educators should not hesitate to foster creativity in their pedagogical methods for teaching reading, incorporating a variety of formats and not solely relying on English textbooks. Diverse media formats, including but not limited to books, magazines, audiobooks, CDs, and other recorded reading materials, provide students with a range of options for interacting with the content (Keyser, 2021).

There are three important factors that could affect a reading class's performance: the curriculum, the students, and the teacher. The educational objectives, resources, delivery strategies, and evaluation techniques are all included in the curriculum. The teacher is in charge of planning, carrying out, and assessing the educational programme, in addition to choosing the right instructional resources. The people who are learning the English language are, nevertheless, the pupils. Various factors, including attitude, intelligence quotient (IQ), motivation, goals, and learning needs, influence the acquisition of English language skills in students. Ramle et al. (2011) highlighted the significance of teachers' awareness of their students' environment in promoting a sense of curiosity and involvement in early reading. These researchers also underscored the significance of teachers' ability to identify or use instructional strategies, methodologies, and resources that are in line with the abilities of their students.

The third challenge is the use of ineffective pedagogical approaches and instructional resources that do not align with students' individual abilities. It can significantly undermine their motivation to actively participate in the educational process. It is imperative for educators to recognise that the use of appropriate instructional materials has the potential to foster a sense of motivation towards reading among students. According to Chon and Kim (2019), it was suggested that the capacity to inspire children to engage in reading can contribute to their consistent reading habits and consequently enhance their reading proficiency. In an ESL context where language acquisition is often confined to classroom environments, the capacity to motivate readers assumes heightened importance.

However, it is imperative for learners or students to refrain from solely depending on their teachers in order to acquire the essential skill of reading. Individuals should assume responsibility for their own learning, particularly with regards to fostering a genuine affection for reading. Through the implementation of this approach, students will develop a greater sense of belonging and inclusion. The cognitive capacity of children to comprehend written material has a substantial influence on their scholastic achievement.

The Impact of Current Digital Age on Students' Engagement with Reading

The digital age has significantly influenced reading engagement among students. The emergence of the digital media revolution has brought about an important shift in the reading experience. The exclusive reliance on traditional print-based materials as the primary source of reading material has diminished. This is in line with the findings by Baba and Affendi (2020), who found out that most respondents (67.5%) leaned towards digital materials, while the remaining 32.5% indicated a preference for printed texts. Individuals have the ability to conveniently access electronic books at no cost or opt for paid online services. In contrast to traditional print publishing, which relies on physical copies, e-publishing leverages technology and the internet to provide content accessibility to a wide range of readers through various devices such as e-readers, smartphones, tablets, and computers (Ashikuzzaman, 2023). Using technology in ESL classes has proven to be a successful approach for resolving issues that teachers encounter. This method improves the whole learning experience, raises students' motivation to study the language, and eventually raises their proficiency and mastery levels (Halim & Hashim, 2019).

Despite these advantages, the digital age has introduced the existence of digital distractions, in which the usage of digital devices can hinder learning by giving distracted pupils the impression that multitasking will not affect their academic achievement (Pérez-Juárez et al., 2023). This is particularly true through social media, internet entertainment, and other digital activities, which make it difficult to focus on reading for an extended period of time. According to Balan et al (2019), the influence of technology and social media distractions has been shown to reduce reading habits and contribute to a rise in the lack of interest in reading. Essentially, technology has created a contradiction in students' lives by helping them participate in educational activities but also acting as a distraction, making it harder for them to complete their tasks, including during their reading activities. This is in line with the findings of Samsuddin & Aspura (2021), who showed that most respondents would rather spend their free time on social media platforms than reading. Furthermore, a study by UNSW Sydney's Gonski Institute for Education (2021) revealed 83% of parents think digital devices negatively distract their children's attention.

Hence, teachers and parents play a key role in guiding students to navigate the digital age mindfully, encouraging them to view reading not as a tedious task but as a gateway to in-depth knowledge, critical thinking, and enhanced language skills. In addressing the impact of the digital age on students' engagement with reading, there is a need to strike a balance between leveraging technology for educational purposes and cultivating a genuine passion for the profound benefits that reading offers in personal and academic growth. It is also crucial that teachers and parents keep an eye on how their children use technology at work to ensure that they are not becoming sidetracked and to ensure that technology is integrated into education in a sustainable and long-lasting way.

Reading habits and its effects on students' academic performance

The concept of reading habit refers to an individual's reading patterns, preferences for reading materials, and the frequency at which they engage in reading activities (Fatiloro et al., 2017). It can also be described as encompassing factors such as the amount of time dedicated to reading, the volume of reading material consumed, and the specific content that is chosen. The development of a habit is a subconscious process in which individuals repeatedly engage in a particular behaviour, gradually incorporating it into their daily routine.

This observation aligns with McKnight and Allen (2018), who suggested that repetitive behaviours can become automatic actions that occur without conscious cognitive processing. Hassan et al (2021) argued that reading habits significantly influence various aspects of reading behaviour, including material selection, engagement in reading activities, time allocation for reading, choice of reading locations, and levels of reader motivation. There are two major effects of reading habits on academic performance based on the findings. The effects are; (1) improving students' academic performance, (2) enhancing students' cognitive skills.

Improving Students' Academic Performance

There are substantive past studies that provided empirical evidence that underscores the profound impact of reading habits on students' academic performance (e.g. Whitten et al., (2016; Fatiloro et al., 2017; Bibi et al., 2020; Ehsan & Sultana, 2020; Hassan et al., 2021; Benevides & Peterson, 2010; Abid et al., 2023).

Both Whitten et al (2016); Fatiloro et al (2017) showed a direct link between academic success and regular reading habits where students who develop a regular reading habit are more likely to achieve academic success. In another study, Bibi et al (2020) explored the connection between academic performance and students' study habits and found a statistically significant positive connection. This implies that reading is one of the productive study habits that help students succeed academically. Thirdly, Ehsan and Sultana (2020) found out that reading habits have a significant influence on students' academic performance. The study highlights how crucial reading is in determining how well pupils do in school. Proficiency in reading is vital for students, as it can impact their academic performance and future work endeavours (Jamil & Aziz, 2021). Moreover, Hassan et al (2021) focused on the investigation of secondary school students and demonstrated a noteworthy correlation between their reading behaviours and reading proficiency. This underscores the importance of instilling positive reading habits early in a student's academic journey. According to Benevides and Peterson (2010), readers were able to attain higher academic performance. In fact, reading habits, study techniques, and academic success in English are all positively correlated (Abid et al., 2023). Additionally, the studies they conducted found that students' academic success is moderately determined by their reading habits and study skills. These results align with the literature review results of Hassan et al (2021); Ameyaw and Anto (2018), who reported a positive correlation between reading habits and academic accomplishment, suggesting that reading habits affect students' academic performance. These findings suggest that individuals who prioritise regular reading exhibit higher levels of academic success compared to those who do not cultivate such habits.

The cumulative evidence supports the notion that students with strong reading habits not only enhance their critical reasoning skills but also significantly broaden their knowledge base through consistent engagement with diverse literary works. This expanded understanding not only positively influences academic performance but also proves advantageous in various aspects of life. Reading emerges as a powerful tool that equips students to navigate a myriad of life experiences, improve language proficiency, and develop a more nuanced and informed perspective. This holds true across a spectrum of literary genres, encompassing both fiction and nonfiction works. As such, fostering and encouraging a culture of regular reading among students emerges as a key strategy for promoting academic excellence and holistic development.

Enhancing Students' Cognitive Skills

Research has observed that ESL learners who engage in extensive reading of both academic and non-academic texts demonstrate the development of critical thinking skills, the acquisition of vocabulary proficiency, the enhancement of self-confidence in language usage, and the improvement of overall reading comprehension. In accordance with the aforementioned arguments, fostering a robust reading practice can positively impact the improvement of reading velocity, fluency, lexicon, overall knowledge, and scholastic achievement. Numerous studies e.g. Balan et al (2019); Muawanah (2016); Bendriss & Golkowska (2011) have demonstrated a correlation between positive outcomes and the subsequent academic performance of individuals. Participating in reading activities has been shown to improve an individual's vocabulary proficiency and facilitate the growth of effective communication skills. This activity promotes the enhancement of skills related to creative language usage.

Frequent readers become better writers because they read a wider range of genres. Students can learn a variety of text structures and language patterns from this exposure, which they can then use in their own writing (Emak & Ismail, 2021). According to Palani (2010), efficient reading is a crucial component of effective learning, and reading is connected to the entire educational process, including writing. Consequently, this will enable them to articulate themselves more effectively and enhance their English writing skills, ultimately contributing to improved academic performance in the near future. As a result, strong reading habits are necessary for academic success.

Hassan et al (2021) demonstrated that the reading habits of ESL learners have a major effect on their reading proficiency. The development of positive and consistent reading habits among ESL learners is likely to result in a gradual improvement in their reading proficiency over time. To attain the desired level of language proficiency, ESL learners need to enhance their reading habits. Cultivating strong reading habits allows students to foster language confidence and expertise such as improving their analytical skills (Muawanah, 2016). The practice of active reading facilitates an analysis of diverse aspects of existence, leading to inquiries regarding the content being perused. This practice enhances cognitive processes and fosters the capacity to effectively express individual viewpoints. Active reading is known to have a stimulating effect on cognitive processes, leading to the generation of novel ideas and thoughts. Additionally, it facilitates the cultivation of a renewed perspective, thereby contributing to the advancement of cognitive abilities. This means that by reading regularly, it helps to sharpen and brighten the mind.

Reading regularly also provides wisdom and emotional comfort (Wagstaff, 2020). Reading offers a short escape from daily routines, which provides relief. Engaging in the act of deeply involving oneself in a captivating literary work has the effect of transporting one's consciousness to an alternate reality, thereby offering temporary relief from the various pressures and anxieties encountered in one's daily life. The practice of engaging in reading activities offers a multitude of advantages for one's cognitive, physical, and emotional well-being. Stimulation of the brain through various activities helps maintain its cognitive functions, ensuring the sustained engagement of its neural networks and fostering optimal mental well-being and cognitive prowess.

On the other hand, the absence of reading habits has been linked to a notable decline in academic performance. Mugambi (2015) asserted that insufficient reading habits contribute to below-average academic performance. Benevides and Peterson (2010) found

out that individuals with lower levels of reading comprehension displayed disinterest in reading and did not perceive assigned readings as valuable. Conversely, those who found enjoyment in reading exhibited higher scores (Benevides & Peterson, 2010). This is further reiterated by Hassan et al (2021), whose findings also revealed that there is a strong correlation between the reading achievement of ESL students and their reading habits. The reading habits also have a big impact on how well ESL learners read. These results emphasise the role that reading habits play in predicting the reading achievement of ESL students. Thus, reading habits do have positive effects on students' academic performance. The cultivation of reading habits plays a vital role in fostering academic excellence among students. Although reading may be perceived as a challenging task, it offers numerous benefits, primarily by enhancing individuals' existing knowledge.

Conclusion

The review shows that reading, which is a vital skill crucial for comprehension and academic success, faces challenges in the modern era marked by the digital age and prevalent social media. The shift from intellectual curiosity to a perceived task is evident as leisure activities like watching videos and internet browsing often replace reading, indicating a possible ignorance of its critical role in personal growth. Additionally, challenges in teaching reading arise from instructional strategies, the selection of materials, and the use of ineffective pedagogical approaches. Distractions introduced by the digital shift, particularly through social media and online entertainment, pose difficulties in maintaining students' engagement with reading. To overcome these obstacles, teachers are highly suggested to remain committed, employing diverse teaching strategies that accommodate various learning preferences. Recognising the critical role of appropriate teaching materials, teachers play an essential part in encouraging active reading.

The review also revealed that forming good reading habits has positive effects on a variety of aspects of people's lives, such as intellectual growth, viewpoint growth, and personal development. The findings show that students with a consistent reading habit demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement. With a good reading habit, ESL students' reading proficiency can be improved and enhanced. Apart from that, reading habits help to enhance an individual's vocabulary skills and promote the development of proficient communication abilities. This activity facilitates the development of skills associated with creative language utilisation. In addition to bolstering an individual's capacity for proficient communication, the practice of participating in writing exercises also plays a substantial role in cultivating the progression of one's writing proficiency. Moreover, the art of active reading encourages exploration of different aspects of life, which prompts questions about the material being read. This exercise improves cognitive functions and cultivates the ability to articulate personal opinions clearly. Active reading is believed to stimulate cognitive functions, resulting in the development of fresh ideas and concepts. Additionally, it promotes the development of a fresh perspective, aiding in the development of cognitive capacities. Furthermore, the regular practice of reading activities has several benefits for one's cognitive, physical, and emotional health. Engaging in various activities stimulates the brain, ensuring constant involvement of its neural networks and fostering optimal mental health and cognitive abilities.

Apart from teachers and students, this literature review is also beneficial to parents and policymakers. Teachers cultivate a passion for reading in their students through the utilisation

of varied methodologies in their instructional practices pertaining to reading. This is crucial as it will affect students' motivation in reading. Choosing and using the suitable material will help to motivate and engage them in reading. Also, teachers can promote the use of these digital resources by encouraging students to engage with online reading materials. On the other hand, parents can help foster reading habits by recognising the advantages of incorporating reading into their children's academic performance. It is also imperative that children witness their parents actively engaging in the act of reading with a sense of enjoyment. Instilling a passion for reading in their children from an early age is vital. Policymakers also develop strategies with the objective of improving students' reading habits. This entails ensuring the availability and ease of access to reading materials within libraries and resource rooms. Schools need to upgrade their libraries and provide a variety of reading materials in order to attract students' interest. Future research could further investigate the factors that influence the reading habit among students in an ESL classroom. As the study progressed, it would be beneficial to understand the needs of students towards the reading habit by looking at the factors that might be a measurement of the reading habit environment in other specific contexts.

In conclusion, this literature review makes a significant contribution to the understanding of how reading habits impact students' academic performance. By synthesizing existing research and identifying key patterns, challenges, and potential interventions, the study offers valuable insights that might influence educational practices, policies, and future research attempts in this field. The role of teachers, policymakers, and parents is crucial in cultivating reading motivation and reading habits among students, which will promote the literacy development of children.

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